

Chasing Snowflakes (Dreamnotfound)

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by [passmethemolly](#)

Summary

After a few careless words, George suddenly finds himself needing a boyfriend for the holiday season to bring to his family back in England. Clay, being the great friend he is, plays along with his friend's crazy plan of pretending to be dating for the four weeks. What could possibly happen?

Mature for language use.

Notes

Disclaimers:

This story was heavily inspired by Dirty Laundry (Klance fic) by Gibbslythe so if there are similarities don't sue me and check it out, but I was having a hard time being able to list this as an inspired work.

I also do not live in England, sorry if there are things wrong!!

!!!! I love and respect both Clay and George and this is no way meant to make them uncomfortable, this is purely for entertainment. I will remove any content that they deem

weird or uncomfortable to them, I do not want to hurt their friendship in any way. !!!!!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter Notes

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George had really done it now.

He had a day to find himself a boyfriend before he flew off to England and had to show his family the 'mysterious guy' he was dating. Except, there was no mysterious guy. Hell, George wasn't even talking to anyone. So how was he supposed to conjure up a guy, that could pass for a boyfriend, but had enough in common with George so it wasn't obvious he had no idea who the guy was?

Easy answer. Bring his best friend and slap a fake label on him.

It was a genius plan, in George's opinion. One of his best plans and he just came up with it after ten minutes of pacing his apartment back and forth, and fifteen minutes after his family begged him to bring his 'boyfriend' over for Christmas. However, the surprising, shocking, twisting part of the plan was that Clay was already down to act the part.

"I- what?" George starts with confusion all over his face. Clay was leaned back in a chair and he shrugged gently.

"What's the worst that can happen? I've always wanted to go to England, I had nothing else planned for Christmas, and it's not like we have to make out in front of them," he says. George nods and his face breaks out into a relieved grin.

"Yeah, no making out involved. Promise," George laughs. "But you're right, it's only for four weeks and then we can put this behind us."

"Nothing is gonna happen, yeah," Clay says. The two boys sit in silence that was neither comfortable or awkward before George coughs and takes his leave. Saying something about leaving Clay to pack and he'll be here in the morning to pick him up.

George couldn't believe it. He was managing to pull off a ridiculous plan to con his family into thinking he's been seeing someone, when in fact, it's his friend. The whole thing seemed stupid, really. He got tired of hearing about his aunt's husband and how great her love life is, so he just blurted out he had someone too and now he's dragging his best friend to another country to pose as a boyfriend. He owes Clay big time after all of this.

George opens his apartment door and makes his way to his room, flopping down on his back on his bed. He had really hoped Clay wouldn't have taken it weirdly and ruined their friendship, but he took it surprisingly well. Weird, since George was convinced Clay didn't have a single go with the flow bone in his body-let alone a romantic one- so he had fully expected resistance and a lot of "What the fuck"s. But hey, whatever made the plan go smoothly and George didn't have to bring out the laundry washing compromise. Double win.

Rolling over with a yawn, George begins to drift off with a feeling he can't shake as he watches his filled suitcase disappear.

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"I can not believe we're doing this," George says as he stares up at his parent's home. After around seven and a half hours of traveling, the two have finally made it and are now confronted with the sudden realization that they are now 'boyfriends'.

It's not like they haven't already discussed things though, they have a list of do's and don'ts followed by emergency code words to let the other person know when things are getting weird. The two agreed that hand-holding and hugging were okay but cuddling, and obviously kissing, were don'ts. Apple meant it's time to go, bear means bring it down a few notches, and purple meant they need to talk about something. But even with all of these codes and lists, something felt off to George.

"Don't sweat it, dude. We got it, I'm sure as long as we don't say anything we'll be in the-"

"GEORGE!" A voice screams out and the front door swings open. A short woman with a blonde pixie cut runs over and wraps him in a tight hug. "George, my love, how are you?"

"Hey mum," George says with a nervous laugh. His eyes flick up to Clays and give him a 'don't fuck this up' look with a tight smile. Once George gets the woman to peel off of him, she turns her attention to Clay- who felt like a giant standing next to the two.

"Mum, this is Clay. My-uh- my," George struggles to get the title out. Don't choke now, idiot. We just got here. Clay screams to him in his mind, hoping George can read his thought. "My boyfriend,"

"Hello, nice to meet you," Clay says and he puts out a hand, but instead, he is also wrapped in a hug and greeted with a warm grin.

"Hello, Clay. I'm Rose, how are you?" Her voice is like smooth chocolate in Clay's ears, and he opens his mouth to respond but is instead interrupted by two younger siblings running and crashing into George's legs.

"Hey, guys!" George greets the two demons latching on to his legs. He turns his attention back to Clay, lifting one leg up to show a girl with curly brown hair and a toothy grin. "Twins, this is Clay. Clay, this one is Mary and the little boy is Jack."

Clay doesn't do children. At all. But he smiles at them and manages a small hi, feeling out of place completely between the accents and the people.

Then, a tall man emerges. Taller than Clay tall. He has a stern-looking face and a skinny body but he holds out his hand to Clay and shakes it, the tight grip surprising him. The man, who Clay assumed to be George's father, didn't say a word and stalked back inside the house.

"That was my dad, not much of a talker." George offers.

Clay glances at him. "Yeah, I figured." And that earns a playful eye-roll from George.

The England air was chilly with a biting wind that caused Clay to shudder and shove his hands into his hoodie pockets, which George's mother took notice of quickly.

"Oh, what kind of host am I? Please you guys, come inside and George will show you to his room,"

his mom says and they pick up their suitcases, George taking long strides to catch up to her.

"Wait, my room? I thought I was staying in mine and Clay was staying in the guest?" George asks and his eyes find Clay's, the two share a look.

"Ah, well-" his mom starts with a chuckle. "You see, I thought about it and I decided that I don't need to be so cautious. I'm sure you two have slept together before, so why keep you two apart? Besides, you're both adults and your cousins are sleeping in there on Christmas eve."

Good thing George's mother was facing the counter when she finished her thought because both of their mouths were wide open.

"Uh, I really think I would like that guest-" Clay starts to say but George's boney elbow digs into his side.

"Shut up, idiot. Just go along with it," George hisses underneath his breath.

"Uh, I don't know about you but I'm not sure about the fact your mom thinks we've slept together," Clay whispers back.

"If we don't play along with it, she's gonna think it's weird that we don't want to," he reasons. Clay sighs because of course, George was right.

Once it was clear Clay was done fighting, George thanked his mom and the two dragged their suitcases up the steep stairs.

"I'm still not sure how I feel about the fact that your mom thinks we've slept together," Clay says as they stop in front of the first wooden door in the hallway.

"Well guess what, Einstein? When people date, it's a normal thing. Now stop pouting because you would've been missing out on my super cool room," George says and he flings the door open. It was a small room with a twin bed shoved in a corner and a dresser alongside it. A desk sits on the left-most wall with a window in front of it, giving a lovely view of the grey street and sky. A chair and small bookcase sit in another corner and then Clay sees that everything is blue. The comforter on the bed, the chair, the rug, the walls- everything.

"Yeah, okay. 'Cool'," Clay said as he looks around the room and his eyes fall onto the small bed. "How are we both supposed to fit on there?"

George's dark eyes briefly flick over to the bed, uninterested, as he starts unpacking his things.

"I don't know, we'll just figure it out later," George says. "Dibs on the right side though."

"Ah, what?! I wanted the right side," he says. The right side was where the wall was and Clay was a sucker for sleeping with his back against something. "And I'm the guest and I'm saving your butt here, so pass up the right side."

George laughs. "No way dude, it's my house! Besides, you agreed to do this."

"But I'm way taller than you, so that means I need more space,"

"What? No, it doesn't! I'm not even that short."

"Dude, you're like an ant compared to me," Clay jokes and George throws a t-shirt at him.

"Shut up!" George says but Clay can see a laugh crack through his words and it wasn't long before

a bubble of giggles started. George covered his mouth with his hand and turned away, shoulders bouncing and a wide grin peeking through his fingers. Clay tore the shirt from his chest, a painful wheeze starting as he tossed George's shirt back. At the end of the day, he was right about George's height and this is what ultimately won him the right side of the bed.

When Clay woke up in the morning, he was alone in a blue room with a stifling quiet throughout the house. There wasn't any talking or yelling from the twins, no pots and pans banging together, no TV sound- just quiet.

Clay stretches and climbs out of George's bed, tugging on the green hoodie he left behind the door and starts the long trek down the stairs with the floorboards creaking and cold. God, was he tired though. He's been up for two minutes and he already feels like he should go curl up on the bed and sleep for another five hours, and apparently so could George.

When Clay walked into the kitchen, he found his friend face down on the island counter with his head tucked in his arms. His brown hair was messy, greasy, and dangerously close to the empty cereal bowl still filled with milk. Careful not to wake him, Clay slowly slides the bowl away from his friend and takes a seat next to him on the island. They've been in England for two days now and it's been pretty good so far, considering they have throw pick up lines at each other every once and a while to keep up the act. Yesterday, the boys took a walk around George's neighborhood and his friend talked about the dumb things he used to do as a kid.

"One time," George started with a chuckle and pointing to a small stream off to the side of the road. "Me and my friends thought it would be a great idea to make our own ice during the winter, so we would go in there in rain boots and bare hands and scoop up water in buckets. We would leave them there overnight and go home with purple hands and feet. My mum was so pissed when I kept doing it,"

Clay wheezed. "Nice to know you were born an idiot,"

This had earned Clay a shove and a chuckle, but the two kept walking and talking until the sun dipped behind the city skyline and the temperature dropped.

But here they were, not even half a week into this scheme, and his family is eating this up. Clay mimics his friends pose on the counter, his eyes studying his still sleeping friend. Who wakes up to eat a bowl of cereal just to fall asleep again? How did he even fall asleep while eating? His friend was weird but Clay learned how to put up with it for four years now, so hearing that he needed a fake boyfriend for Christmas didn't surprise him. To Clay, he wanted to come because he didn't have anyone to go back to for Christmas and he would've been bored out of his mind without George.

George stirs and stretches his arms out, gripping the other side of the counter and sits up. He blinks and looks down at Clay, who was still sitting in the hunched position.

The boys stare at each other for a second.

"What the hell, were you watching me sleep?" George asks with a teasing smile. He had dark bags under his eyes and his lips were chapped.

"How could I not? You look rough, dude," Clay teases back then gestures to his friend's eyes. "Seriously, bag check for George."

George rolls his eyes and stands up. "Is this how you're treating your boyfriend? This sounds kinda toxic to me,"

"Aw, it looks like we have to break up. Wonder what your family will think?" Clay deadpans and

George giggles.

"What do you want to do today?" George asks with a small yawn. Hopefully, it won't be something that required a lot of energy, they're both still recovering from the jet lag and walking around yesterday did not help.

"Definitely something low-key," Clay replies. George racks his brain and then snaps his fingers and points excitedly at his friend.

"Minecraft! Duh," and he could see Clay's eyes brighten at the mention of the game and earns George a smile that makes his eyes scrunch up.

"You read my mind," Clay said, and the two walk into the living room where his mom sat in the far corner reading a book. He could see the twins outside playing the swingset outback and George's dad was nowhere to be found. The duo flops on the sofa and George hands Clay an Xbox controller.

"I know it's not what we're used to, but it's all we have in the house," George explains and Clay holds the controller awkwardly in his hands.

"I have no idea how to play like this," Clay said. George snorts and readjusts Clay's hands on the controller so it rests more comfortably. George's hands were hot, despite the chilly outside and it took everything in Clay not to jump from the hot touch on his cold hands.

"Jeez Clay, your hands are freezing," George points out.

"Well, your hands are warm," Clay responds. His gaze drifts up to where George's mother was and saw that she was watching them closely, a ghost of a smile on her face. Clay quickly glances away and tries to focus on George's explanation of where the buttons were and the functions.

"Actually, this was the first thing I played Minecraft on," George says and looks up to Clay.

"Cool," Clay says lamely. He feels his friend study his face and small realization flickers in his eyes, glancing back to where his mom was still watching them closely. George slowly moves his hands back over Clay's, who was stiff with the inability to react or help. He feels his hands let go of the controller and George lays his hands over Clay's fingers. The two dared to meet each other's eyes with the clear message of Holy fuck, this got really weird really quickly.

"Is this... better?" George tries, the words fumbling in his mouth. Clay just nods, now refusing to look at his friend even though his hands were warming up a bit. Clay flicks his eyes to Rose, who smiles contently and returns her attention to her book. And as soon as she does, Clay yanks his hands back and rubs them on his knees with a blush creeping up his neck.

"Yes! Thank you, George," he says. "Now, can we please start? I'm curious to see how bad I am at this."

"You say that like you weren't bad at PC Minecraft," George scoffs. Clay elbows his friend who starts the game up.

The heavy awkward tension quickly left once the boys fell into the routine of playing, George loving the entertainment of Clay dying over and over again due to the new controls. They played for hours, occasionally stopping to stretch and poke fun at one another's survival houses and keeping tally on who did a stupid action in the game. So far, George was ahead on that one. Like all good things, however, the game soon lost its appeal and the boys started to mess around. Hunting down the other across the map or setting traps for the other to find, which launched a new



round of jabs and laughter from them.

"Oh, Georggeee," Clay sings softly. He was leaned forward as far as he could, eyes trained on where he could see his approaching friend on the screen.

"Oh no, where are you now?" George asks. He was leaned as far away from the screen like he was scared Clay's character was actually coming for him. Suddenly, he lurches forward once he spots Clay's character sprinting towards him.

George was screaming. A loud shrill scream that could've made the neighborhood dogs bark if he went one more octave higher. Clay started wheezing as he repeatedly smacked his friend on screen before the reward message of his death came up.

"Yes!" Clay exclaims, fist in the air and laughing. George groans and slumps down, but he had a crazy smile on his face. "I think it's safe to say that I rule at the Xbox and that you don't deserve to have that controller."

George looks at Clay, an eyebrow raised. "What? What do you-"

Before he could finish, Clay snatches up the controller and holds it high above his head with a small giggle. George audibly gasps, shocked at the audacity of his friend, and reached up to get it, ignoring how Clay's shirt rides up a bit and exposes his side.

"Come on, Clay! Give it back, I'll let you get away next time when I hunt you down." George pleads, hand clawing at the empty air where the controller was just inches above.

"No! I told you, I'm the king of this and you were making fun of me," Clay says. Their laughter warms the air with harsh wheezes and loud howls as the two fight for the spare controller and more jokes were thrown.

"Clay, please-" George grabbed Clay's arm and forced it down, the controller falling on the floor and George lurching forward. The boys freeze, looking down at the controller then slowly turning back to one another with their noses almost touching and they sit like that for a minute. Just staring. Not even George dared to breathe and he was the most out of breath since he was trying to climb up his tall friend.

Clay never noticed how deep his friend's eyes were, though. Sure, they were a muddy brown with a passing glance, but up close, Clay could see small flecks of gold and that they were more of a rich chocolate color. Clay blinks and shoves his friend off, running his hand through his hair.

"I'm holding you to that promise, George," Clay says. He picks up the controller from the floor, handing it to his friend who was suddenly interested in the carpet.

"Clay-" George starts.

"Look, don't worry about it. We were just having fun." Clay assures with a smile. But George knows his friend, he knows that bothered him. George swallowed whatever apology he had and smiled back.

"I know I said I would let you escape," George says, putting extra enthusiasm in his voice. "But I may have had my fingers crossed."

"What does that even mean?" Clay asks, turning his attention back on screen. "What the-"

Suddenly George's character was flying towards him, hitting the life out of Clay's character and he

barely escaped with a heart.

"No!" George's screams turned into whines but Clay's laughter was back and that's all that mattered to him.

The boys were laying on George's bed, fingers aimlessly scrolling through their feeds as the sky outside grew darker and darker. Although the tension eased a few hours ago, there was still this thick...something in the air between them and it was driving George absolutely insane.

George was not a conflict person. Anything that had to do with confronting or doing something that had the smallest threat of starting a misunderstanding was terrifying to him, so asking his friend why they're being weird or if Clay felt that weirdness too- was out of the question. On the other hand, it really didn't have to be this weird. Sure, George was practically nose to nose with his best friend but it truly wasn't that big of a deal- right? No, like George was asking whether he was right or not. Did he miss something in the six or seven seconds they were posed like that or did he just make his friend really-

"You good, man?" Clay's voice interrupts his internal questioning. George turns his head over to Clay, who's eyes were squinting slightly and his nose wrinkled up with concern.

"Yeah," he lied. "Why? Something on your mind?" Oh god, please don't answer that. Actually, no please do. Wait actually-

"You're making that face again. Your deep thought face," Clay said, his body now fully turned to him.

"My...what?"

"You make this face when you think really hard about something," Clay explains and makes a face like he just bit into a lemon. "Like this."

George scoffs, mildly offended at how exaggerated Clay made his thinking face seem. "I don't look like that,"

"So something is on your mind then?" he said and George pauses for a minute, mind racing for a comeback or some sort of reason to avoid asking Clay if he was okay with being that close to George.

God damn it- THINK GEORGE! But nothing comes up and the two just end up staring at each other again. Since George asked him to come along as his fake boyfriend, there has been an uncomfortable amount of staring between them.

"Oookay then," Clay says and turns back on his back. "Nevermind,"

George lets a small sigh of relief escape and he just leaves it at that. If he even tried to defend himself there, Clay would never let it go and it was rare for him to just let things go.

Oh my god, wait. What if he knows what George was thinking? Could he tell he wanted to bring up what happened and he just let it be because he also didn't want to talk about it? George pretends to be interested in a Twitter thread, alarms ringing off in his head until the two said a brief goodnight and fell asleep with their backs turned to each other.

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The next day, the stiff air around them was completely gone as they walked the town. They were back to mocking and shoving each other, their laughter twirling in the biting English air.

And by biting, Clay wasn't exaggerating. His nose was sore and numb from the cold, his hands- despite the thick gloves George's mom insisted on giving him- were buried deep in his coat pockets with numb tips, his lips chapped and eyes dry. He didn't understand how George was able to walk out with a coat, beanie, and thin gloves. Plus, George didn't even look cold despite his breathing coming out in wisps.

"Clay, Clay-" George says. He wiggles his friend's shoulder to get his attention and points to a bakery window where the prettiest cinnamon bun was perched. "We have to try that,"

"I dunno man, I'm kinda full from your mom's breakfast buffet," he said. Also, it would feel like a crime to eat something that pretty.

"I might die if we don't try."

Clay rolls his eyes. "You won't die."

"Pleease?" George drags out, and his hand was already on the handle of the door. Clay pretends to weigh the options for a minute, driving George extra crazy.

"Fine," Clay says and he holds the door open for his shorter friend. The two walk inside and basking the warmth and smell of bread and cinnamon inside the bakery. There wasn't much of a line and once the two got up, Clay orders them one cinnamon roll to share. The barista, a girl with shiny blonde hair, takes their order and glances up at Clay.

"Oh, an American? Where are you from?" she asks him, laying her chin on her hand. Clay huffs a small laugh and looks at George for help, but he was backed up a few feet and watching the interaction with a weird look on his face.

"Oh, Florida." He finally answers and the girl- Miranda as stated on her name tag- chuckled softly.

"We get a lot of Americans here. How long are you staying?" Along with children, girls were just as bad to deal with, in Clay's opinion.

"A few weeks, I'm staying for the holiday season."

"Do you need a tour guide? I'll be more than happy to meet up with you," Miranda practically purrs.

Um-

"Sorry to bother you two," George says from behind them. "But I got our roll babe."

Babe.

Remind Clay to ignore the shiver down his spine.

"Y-yes! Okay, thank you. We're gonna go...now..." Clay says to the barista with a small wave. Her blue eyes were wide with surprise as she watched the two walk out of the bakery, but she waves bye back.

As soon as they are out of view of the store, George's laugh bubbles up before he bends over his knees and the blue bag crinkled in his hand.

"Oh my god, Clay," He says between giggles. "Are you serious? You looked like you were gonna throw up on the spot, you looked so uncomfortable."

"Haha, laugh it up," Clay scoffs and yanks the bag out of his friend's hands. "I didn't need saving by the way."

"Yes you totally did, Clay. What were you going to tell my family when you went to hang with her? Plus, I could feel your vibe."

"I could feel your vibe', shut up George," Clay laughs and the two find a spot on a bench. The cold was seeping into Clay's clothes and the smell of the pastry was driving him crazy, so this better have been worth it. They still had some shopping to do after this.

He watches George split it and take a bite, inhaling sharply.

"Oh my god," he moans.

"That good?"

"Yes! Take your half before I do," George said. He slides the piece to Clay, who was still watching his friend. "What?"

He snaps out of it. "Nothing, just making sure it wasn't poisoned."

The boys eat in silence, watching people pass, and when they finish- George is already up and pulls Clay.

"Come on, I know a perfect store to show you."

They walked for a while. Like, a long while. At least a mile long. Clay's shoes were getting wet from the puddles of melted ice and his nose seriously felt frostbitten, but George insist they kept walking and pushed Clay forward a few times when he stopped. But finally, when they arrived at this glorious shop George was raving about the whole way, it was a stupid prop shop.

"Ta-da!" George sings, gesturing to the storefront with a huge grin. "My friends and I used to come here all the time when we were younger. They have all sorts of things to wear and then we would take pictures of each other," he says. Clay stares up at the sign that had a P in prop wearing a hat and the S in store wearing a mustache.

What the hell, he's got nothing to lose.

"Alright, after you, sir," Clay teases, pulling the door open and George stands there with a wild grin. "Don't just stand there, it's cold as fuck out here."

"Language!"

"English," Clay replies under his breath as they step inside. There were racks of hats hanging from walls and dramatic clothes all around them. Clay takes a minute to walk around, tugging at princess dresses and tuxedos.

"Look, Clay," George calls. When he turns around to his friend, he finds George with a large plastic mustache, a floppy beach hat, and star sunglasses.

Clay barks out a laugh and claps. "George, what the hell?"

"No, good sir. I am not George anymore," his friend says in a deep voice. Clay laughs way harder than he should.

"W-who are..." pause for more laughter. "Who are you then?"

George pauses, eyes looking up at the ceiling. "Daniel."

"Daniel? Please, you can do better than that." Clay wheezes to his friend, who promptly removed the hat.

"You do it then! Outshine the king of this place," George said. When Clay looks at him for a moment, he adds: "If you're the king of Minecraft, I'm the king of the Prop Store."

Clay turns to the rack behind him, throwing on an orange boa and small round glasses. He reaches up to take a cowboy hat and turns to George.

"I-" He starts, pitching his voice so high it hurt. How the hell does George scream like that? "I am Princess Grendaline."

"Stop," George says but he was laughing. It started as a giggle but then progressed out to him bending over again and belly laughing. Clay struck a pose, lips pursed and George laughed harder.

Another pose, another burst of laughter. This time from both ends.

"Oh my god, you're an idiot!" George yells and yanks the cowboy hat off.

"Wait-!" Clay says and he holds up a finger. George pauses, mustache and glasses still on with the biggest smile Clay has ever seen. Clay snaps a quick photo of his unsuspecting friend and earns a hard hit in his shoulder.

"Clay! I swear to god if I find that anywhere- I will get you back," George says but Clay notes the sneakiness in his voice.

"With what?"

"This-" George tugs out his phone and shows a photo of Clay, all dressed up with his head thrown back and a hand on his hip and the other thrown out in front of him like he was grabbing something to the side.

"Wha- How did you get that?!" Clay asks, trying to grab his friend's phone.

"You got really into the posing, dude." He giggles. George looks at the picture one more time before saying, "You look really gay."

That was enough to make Clay's smile falter and he takes a minute to process the comment. He's having fun, though? George is the one who took him to this stupid place anyways, and now he's going to drag him down like that?

Clay begins tugging off the props and putting them back, leaving George standing there confused.

"I- are you okay Clay?" He asks. Jeez, I don't know George. You just called me gay for having fun when you know I'm not and completely ruined wearing boas for me.

"I don't like being called gay, dude." He says, turning to look at George. He can practically see George's gears turn as he tries to come up with a response. "Whatever, don't even worry about that. Can we please just actually shop now?"

"Clay-"

"I'm serious, let's go." He starts to move towards the front of the store but he feels a hot hand grab his wrist and tug him back. He spins to face George, uncharacteristically looking at him with a

serious expression and he says:

"I'm sorry."

Just that. Just a simple apology and he knows that's all he going to get from George in the meantime, so Clay sighs and offers his friend a small smile.

"It's fine, just- not again please," and George nods.

"You know that's not a bad thing right? That wasn't meant to be a negative comment because why would I diss my own self, you know?" His friend tries, hot on Clay's heels out of the store with the cashier looking annoyed they didn't pay for pictures.

"Yes George, I know," Clay sighs again, not really wanting to talk about it anymore. It's not that he has a problem with gay people. Obviously, since he's friends with one and posing as his fake boyfriend, but man that word next to his name just stirs something in his gut. An unknown that drives him crazy since he doesn't know what the hell the feeling is. Confusion? Anger? Sickness? Dismay? He just doesn't know.

The air becomes stiff again between them and Clay can hear George audibly groan. Clay can't help but silently groan with him too. Again with the stiffness? Really? They needed to get home and spend a minute apart.

"Let's go home, I'm sure my mum is wondering where we went," George reads his thought. It was a lame excuse since his mom specifically said, and Clay quotes, 'Go out for the whole day, I don't care. You two go do whatever and George show him around the town'. So clearly, she wanted them out for the day.

"Yeah, okay."

Clay follows George home, walking just a few steps behind him with his chin tucked in his jacket and watches the cobblestone in the sidewalk blur as his eyes dry but he doesn't even try to clear them.

They only talk at dinner that day, and the rest is spent with George downstairs and Clay upstairs and hiding from the unknown swirl in his stomach.

Chapter Notes

Hello! I just wanted to let you guys know that I plan on making daily updates with this fic!! So be sure to check in here and there for a new chapter if you like it so far, I have a lot of plans. :)

"What about this? Would she like this?"

"I don't know, George. Can she read?"

"I honestly don't know," George says, looking down at a book with a large duck plastered on it. They were in a bookstore, finishing up some holiday shopping and George was struggling to find something for his little sister.

"How old is she? Six? It could pass as a new bedtime story or she can use it to learn," Clay said. George looks at it for a moment longer and places it back, making Clay groan very loudly.

"I'm sorry! I just don't know what to get her," he said. George couldn't blame Clay for being frustrated, he already turned down numerous dolls, trucks, and toys for her and it's only been an hour.

"Look-" Clay presses a small shark plushie in his hands. "You told me she likes ocean animals, right? Boom. Stuffed animal. Kids go crazy for that stuff." George watches his friend take a sip of his drink with eyebrows raised.

Damn it, it was perfect for Mary.

"I guess-" George starts to say but his phone starts ringing, earning him glares from people reading in the chairs a few feet away. He answers and his mom's pleading voice come through.

"Oh! George, please come back home soon, please. The twins can't decorate the cookies without making a mess and they want to be taken outside," Clay leans into George to hear the phone call better and something in him stirs.

"Yeah, we're on our way," George responds, already walking up to the register. "What are you going to do with the cookies then?"

His mom sighs. "Do you and Clay want to finish them? Your father isn't home yet to help, so I'm just going to take the twins up the street to Ms. Dean's." Ms. Dean was their neighbor who also had wild children and when things were getting crazy, his mom would retreat to her house for their kids to play.

"Uh, sure? I guess we could."

"Great! Thank you." His mom hangs up before George could change any plans on her and the boys are left staring at the black screen.

"You interested in decorating cookies?" George asks his friend. Clay shrugs and nods, what else

was he supposed to say? No? They were kinda forced to finish them before the rest of George's family comes.

The pressure between them had eased quite a bit when Clay came and talked to him again that morning with a piece of toast and a gentle smile. It was a weird attempt to mend things without actually saying what happened, but George gave him kudos for stopping the cold shoulder treatment anyways. All that mattered was that Clay was back to himself and George finished Christmas shopping, and the two were back to being the friends they were.

When they finally walked into the kitchen, it looked like a flour bomb was set off and someone flung frosting all over the counter. George runs his finger on the island counter and showed it to Clay.

"Did the twins snort crack or flour?" He jokes and Clay laughs, looking down at the bare cookies.

"Judging by the way your mom sounded on the phone? Probably crack."

It was George's turn to laugh and the two started to pile up all the things they need- more frosting, sprinkles, chocolate chips, marshmallows- anything sugary, really. And it started fine. Normal. Just the two of them, concentrating on icing angels and trees and making them as presentable as possible. But that all changed when Clay attacked.

"Wha- Clay!" George yells as he watches his beautiful blue angel turn a gross green as Clay smeared frosting on it. George had to fight back. Defend his honor.

He picked up the red sprinkles and shook them down on Clay's tree, his friend gasping but then laughing.

"Hey, that actually kind of worked out," He says and holds the cookie to George. "It looks like red Christmas lights!"

"Fuck you, Clay!" George yells and unscrews the top of the sprinkles, horror flashing across Clay's face.

"Okay, let's be smart here-"

But peace was never an option and George dumps the remaining sprinkles over Clay's tree, drowning the area in a sea of red. It was silent for a moment, Clay staring at the tree with his mouth open.

"Ha!" George cheers. "That's what you get! That's what you get for starting a decorating battle with me! I've been at it for years now-" But George's victory was short-lived when Clay lunged for him and rubbed white icing all over his face.

George blinked once. Twice. Then- oh, so that's how he wants to play.

George flings yellow frosting and it lands in the area between Clay's eyes which is returned with a handful of chocolate chips thrown at him. George yelps as the chips bounce off of him and scatter on to the floor, but his hands reach for the nearby bag of flour and he blows it into Clay's smug face. Clay stands up with a spoon full of blue frosting and George's heart sank to the floor because of the holy crap the blue frosting stained skin don't get it on you rule his mom told him when he was a kid.

"Clay- Clay," George pleads, slowly backing away from his crazed friend.

"Geooooorrrge," he sings softly. George's heart skips, but he couldn't tell if it's because of the way his friend sang his name or the fact he could look like a blueberry in a second. But George didn't have time to think about that or act because here came Clay, swiping blue across his forehead.

George's body stiffens and he takes a second to watch his friend in the action, Clay's bright smile and wheezy laugh with his eyes crinkled up. George could also smell the vanilla and boy coming off of his friend's clothes. He was so close. Too close. So close that if George stood up on his tippy toes, he could-

"Clay! No!" George said and ending with a dramatic sigh. He shoves his friend away, creating a comfortable space between them again. "Don't you know this stuff stains?"

Clay didn't care. He was too busy laughing at George's caked face and sprinkled clothes to care. George takes a paper towel and rubs his face off, glaring at his wheezing friend.

"Very funny but don't pee yourself in my kitchen please," George said and Clay pretends to wipe a tear from his eye.

"Oh man, I would apologize but I would say you looked better with that stuff on your face."

"Please, I look good no matter what. Plus, you need to help clean up too! You started it." George points out, tossing a paper towel to him. Clay was still laughing, but it was softer this time.

"I did not."

"Did too."

"Did not."

"Clay, you literally ruined my angel first," George said, poking his head up from behind the counter. He was picking up the chocolate chips from the floor and Clay was busy wiping red frosting from the sides of the island counter.

Clay grunts, in what George took as agreement, and the two clean the counter off and placed the cookies into a container.

"Wait," Clay says out of the blue, and George looks up at him.

"What now?"

"You got icing on your face, idiot."

He thought he wiped it all off. "Where?"

George starts pointing to areas of his face, his friend trying to guide him to the spot before shaking his head.

"I'll get it, just hold still."

Oh god, not again. George thought as his friend leaned in to scrub a spot of his forehead, closer than necessary. Then, he began to feel it. The slow rise of heat from his chest, up to his neck, and to his face and he screamed at himself. George has never- ever- blushed because of Clay and now his body was making him flare-up? Was this some kind of sick joke?

But no it was very real and time felt slow. The five seconds it took Clay to wipe blue frosting from his face felt like five minutes. George's heart was pounding against his ribs, blood roaring in his

ears as his friend leaned in just the tiniest bit closer, nose scrunched up and biting his lip in determination. He lets his eyes trail down to Clay's lips.

NONONONONOGODPLEASENO! George begged himself. He can't- he won't- he shouldn't be feeling like this, this was supposed to be fake. They've been best friends for four years and now, just because of some frosting, he was going to fall for his best friend/ fake boyfriend?

Man, he was really easy to swoon.

Finally, Clay pulled away with an easy grin and George felt like he could breathe again.

"Did you-" George paused to swallow, still reeling from his pounding heart. "Did you get it?"

"Yeah, but you were right."

"Right about what?"

Clay turns to him, eyes burning into his and he felt like Clay was poking around inside his soul. George needs to leave the room and think about what the hell just happened.

"The blue does stain."

"I told you, you idiot!" George cries out, placing his face in his hands. He does that more to hide his blush when he hears his friend gasp out a laugh and he subtly tugs on his hair.

This is bad. Very bad.

George didn't sleep too well last night. It was spent turned over, staring at the back of his friend's head and trying, but failing, to push his feelings out. He did not like this and it was a few things, one of them being too soon and the other being weird. But one thing did come to George's attention that night and it was when Clay stirred, unconsciously snuggling a bit closer to George's side of the bed with his peaceful face facing him. He wasn't too bad looking when his mouth was shut.

However, now that they were awake and George was running on five hours of sleep, Clay looked like a lizard wearing a blonde wig.

"Please-" George begged to his friend. "-just shut the hell up!"

The two were home alone with his siblings but his parents left the radio on and Clay insisted they kept it on to keep the twins from screaming. Clay briefly paused his horrible singing to flick his eyes over to his friend. George was slumped over with his hands covering his ears and brown eyes digging into Clay's satisfied face.

"George, even your siblings are singing," Clay answers and wasted no time picking up where he left off in the song. It was true. The twins had matching spoons in their hands and were running around the island, screaming the lyrics while occasionally whacking George to stand up.

"I wouldn't call it that."

Clay rolls his eyes and tugs on George's sweatshirt to pull him up, still singing. Against George's will and free person, a whisk was shoved in his hand by his sister and shoved into Clay's chest by his brother.

"Sing! Sing! Sing!" they chant and Clay laughs in George's face. Too close, again.

"Dude, your siblings are awesome."

Of course he thought that since he was now put on the spot in the middle of the kitchen with his whisk microphone and twin audience. George recognized the song, it was that I Can See Clearly Now song that, for some unknown reason, everyone knew by heart without having to listen to it.

Mary and Jack latched on to his legs, still loudly chanting for him to sing with their little hands pulling down on his sweatshirt. George did not want to sing, however, and he turned to Clay, face begging to be released from this personal Hell but he gets laughed at. Clay was fighting through the song while laughing, his head was thrown back and smile was directed at George. Only for a moment, George allowed himself to stare. But only for a moment because Clay started singing to him and he had to tear his eyes away before he melted.

"I can see clearly now, the rain is gone-"

Clay was staring right at him, reciting the lyrics word for word-beat for beat- to his friend and George's eyes widened in shock. It wasn't even a romantic song but George still felt that lightheaded rush of blood to his cheeks and thudding in his chest, mouth dropping slightly at his friend.

George felt the twins let go of his legs and he, honest to god, stumbled. He stumbled when he was standing still, and the worst part was that Clay grabbed him and forced him to dance around with him. Their hands locked together and George's body just followed whatever moves Clay was

doing, with his other arm swinging limply at his side, but man was the beat catchy- and so was his friend's laugh. Soon, George was laughing the song lyrics and twirling his little sister in his free hand, refusing to let go of Clay's who had it held above their heads like they were the champions of kitchen karaoke. George's brother turned up the volume and all four of them belted out the last few cords of the song.

"Sunshiney day!" George finishes and Clay claps with an easy laugh as the radio cuts off.

"Oh man, you suck," Clay says and his sister laughs at him, earning Clay a tiny high five.

"I-what? You guys wanted me to sing, first of all," George holds his hand to his chest, pretending to be offended at his sister. "And second of all, you're just going to turn on me like that?"

She giggles like the little Satan she is and scurries off, Jack hot on her heels. The two boys sit at the counter and Clay nudges him.

"Don't worry about it man, she just likes me more I guess."

"It's not fair, you don't even like kids."

"You're right, I don't," Clay says and George could hear his smile, heart fluttering in response. Stupid Clay and his stupid smile. "How was my singing though? I've been thinking about switching from Youtube to be on The Voice."

"Clay, you should always follow your dreams-"

"Yeah?"

"Just don't follow that one," George says, facing his friend with a shit-eating grin and Clay's mouth drops open.

"You got me there- damn alright George." His friend says, acting shell shocked but George saw the glint of amusement in his eyes. The truth was that he was a really good singer actually.

Clay's voice was deep but smooth and reminded George of being underwater but it had a hint of a raspiness to it, not that he was paying attention. It was pretty surprising, in the four years of their friendship, George never really heard Clay sing. Like sing sing, not the fake singing he does in front of audiences and it was honestly beautiful.

"Knock knock!"

The front door swings open and suddenly a stream of five people pour into the front hallway, all talking at once. It was like maybe two seconds in when his extended family already found George and Clay in the kitchen and started wrapping them in hugs.

"Oh, Georgie! So good to see you," his Aunt Lilly exclaims, brushing back his hair. His Uncle comes and claps him on the back, which ended up shoving him forward. His Uncle Ben was a big dude, a wrestler in high school and college, and now a gym teacher. A total contrast to his Aunt Lilly, a small woman who worked as a principal in that same school and an ex-police officer.

"You too," George responds.

"Aren't you going to introduce us to your friend," A voice chimes out behind him. George looks at Erin, who was already working her way through the grapes on the counter and for a split second, George had no idea who she was talking about.

"Oh! Yeah, yeah-" here they go. "- guys, this is my boyfriend, Clay. He's staying with us for the holidays."

Clay gives a small wave. "Hello, nice to meet all of you."

Someone kill George. Like right now. His family all stares down at Clay for a moment, the air settling into something so thick, George thought he could eat it with a spoon.

"Welcome to the family, Clay!" His uncle says, doing the clap thing on Clay's back this time, and George felt amused when he also was shoved forward from the hit. Nice to know it wasn't because George was tiny.

"How long have you guys been dating?" Erin asks. The boys share an Oh Fuck look. How could they forget to have an answer to the most basic relationship question? Easy, they're dumbasses.

"A year-" George answers just as Clay says:

"Five months."

The two pause and look at each other from across the kitchen and George's gives him a pointed look. Agree with a year, idiot. George tries to push the thought to him but Clay has the audacity to give him a pointed look for him to agree with the five months.

Are you fuckin- "A year and five months?" Erin answers for them and everyone turns to her.

"Y-yeah, something like that," George said. His cousin studies him for a second and her eyes dart to Clay, then back to him.

"Okay, well how'd you two meet then?" You know, Erin really needs to shut up with these questions they didn't prepare for.

Clay answers for George, saying something about running into each other on a Discord, and Erin takes the answer with a nod. Yet, something glossed over in her eyes when she sees Clay turn away from George and become busy with a piece of fuzz in his jean pockets.

His family resumed talking and moved along throughout the house, George and Clay tagging along and Erin close behind them. Good lord, George could feel her cold blue eyes scorching holes in the back of his head and he finally understood what it was like to be looked at from under a microscope. He scratched the back of his head to make sure his hair wasn't on fire.

"Why aren't you two holding hands?" she whispers to George as they walk into the living room, everyone else listening to his mom.

"What?"

"You and Clay," she scoffs. "We've been walking up and down this house and you guys haven't even looked at each other."

That's because when I look at him I feel like I'm having a heart attack. He thought bitterly to himself but still snuck a glance to his friend, who was leaned calmly against the wall of the living room. Clay feels George's eyes on him so they exchange awkward smiles and Clay turns back to George's mom.

"Does it matter?"

"It's hand-holding. Everyone handholds."

"Not everyone, Erin," George said. His mind flashes back to the kitchen when Clay grabbed his hand and held it up. It was funny, it was like their hands were made to hold the other judging by how easy their hands slotted together and how their grips perfectly held each other. It was like neither of them really wanted to let go.

"Still really weird," she sings songs with a knowing look and she gives him a small shrug, moving up to join her parents in the room and leaving George behind. Damn it, that girl knew how to make George panic.

Once the family began moving again, George walked over and in pace next to Clay. Was hand holding even okay? It was on their list of do's, right? It was for the act anyways, just to really sell the idea and keep his amazing observant cousin at bay. Not like George wanted to hold his hand again.

But George slowly moves his hand out, flinching internally when he feels Clay's fingers brush against his, and wraps his pinky around Clay's. He draws in a breath when he feels Clay, for a quick second, return the wrap but only to falter and pull his hand away.

"What are you doing, dude?" he whispers.

"My cousin, she's on to us. Asked why we weren't holding hands," he explains quickly. His face was hot and he felt the weirdness build between them again. "Look it's fine, I'm just trying to sell-"

"No, no. It's okay," Clay assures him but his face was scrunched in an Okayyy, why is my friend on crack right now sort of way. Clay holds out his hand to George.

Just take it! Take it. Take it right now- George, take it. Stop staring at it, it's a bloody hand just take it.

He takes it.

Their fingers intertwine again, sending bolts of electricity up George's arm and numbing his brain, and Clay gives a short reassuring squeeze to tell him to relax and that it was all good.

"Relax George, you look like you've never held a hand before." Yeah, I haven't held your hand before. "It's just for the act man, don't stress."

George allows himself to release the tension and their hands fall comfortably between them and George subtly tightens his grip against Clay's, sending more sparks through his fingers.

Just for the act.

Clay was a lot of things, but an idiot was not one of them- that was George's job to be the idiot for the both of them. So Clay could definitely tell something was off with George and that when they talked to one another, there was a subtle shift in the undertone of their dialogue but Clay could not figure out what it was. No matter how long he would stare at the blue wall at night and think about the shift, he just can't put a finger on it.

Speaking of fingers, George was a big hand holder. This wasn't a huge surprise to Clay since his friend had the annoying habit to gravitate towards people, sometimes full-on walking in front of them because he wants to be close. And don't even get Clay started on his terrible leaning-in habit, seriously. Anyways, he wasn't shocked at the fact his friend continued to hold his hand as they finished the walk throughout the house and held on even when the two sat on the couch to listen to the family's travels.

It was a bit uncomfortable to Clay though, sitting there with George's sweaty hand on top of his knee with their shoulders just brushing, and listening to strangers talk about the town that he had no idea about. But George's family just rolled with it, blabbing along with the laughter and smiles about the townsfolk and would sneak glances at the boys, the light in their eyes never leaving.

It was weird.

This was weird.

Clay was also lost as fuck in the story, who was Ms. Dean? Where was Acorn Road? What the hell is a bloke? Why isn't George's family making backhanded remarks to them and wrinkling their noses at their presence? Why isn't George letting go still? It's been ten minutes and Clay needed to leave and go collect himself.

But thankfully, Erin blessed them with the gift of heading off to bed. Clay didn't bother to listen to the story that followed and ignored the small whoop from Aunt Lilly, he was busy practically throwing George's hand down and bolting out of the room. It wasn't even nine at night but Clay still got ready and was hiding from George under the covers when he walked in.

He closes his eyes and steadies his breathing, mind reeling back to the way George's family all stared at him when he was introduced. The way the aunt and uncle's eyes widened in... what was it? Shock? Weirdness? Awe? Disgust? Clay didn't know but the swirl was on full blast in his gut and made him want to vomit. He wanted to tell them that it was all fake and he wasn't actually dating George, that he was like them and normal.

Normal.

Clay winced at his word choice, knowing it was a low blow to a whole community that included his best friend. He felt shame sprinkle into the swirl and that word gripped his heart like a vice. What even was normal? Everyone was "normal", no matter who they were and who they liked, but why didn't Clay feel normal?

He feels the bed shift next to him. "You up?"

Just keep sleeping, he can't talk to you if you sleep. You won't read between the lines of the words and you won't feel bad after. Just breathe- in and out, in and out- wait that's too fast. He knows you're awake now.

"Guess not," George mumbles and the lamp clicks off, flooding the room in darkness. The room was still for a while and George's breathing slowed, but Clay could feel George turn his head to him. Nonono, face the ceiling not me, please.

He felt George's fingers slowly creep over to Clay's, which were laying numbly at his side with his neck turned sharply to the wall. He feels George's warm hand cover his and slot between, the heat burning into Clay's hand.

Pull away. Clay orders himself, but his body felt like lead. His arm wasn't listening to him and neither were his lungs, which seemed to stop working. PULL AWAY! He screams to himself but George's hand was still clasped with his, Clay's skin sizzling and warmth crawling up his arm. He didn't want to. He did not want to let go.

Let go of it, you guys don't need to act anymore. This is completely unnecessary and weird. Stop it. A voice from deep in his subconscious reasons, the swirl twisting violently and Clay forces himself to let go. Once he does, cool air rushes to his lungs and his eyes fly open with hot tears threatening to spill. His hand felt empty and a hollow feeling replaced the swirl.

He turns to his side, away from George, and curls his hands to his chest, the one that George was holding still warm. He listens to George mutter something in his sleep before turning away too, and Clay lets a shakey breath go.

Oh. Clay's eyes slide back shut and his heart pounds in his ears. Fuck.

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The next day, Clay made sure to keep a smile on his face and his laugh as wheezy as possible for George. The last thing he needed was for his friend to ask what was wrong and to cause drama.

So when Erin very brightly announced that the pond was frozen over and that they were going ice skating, it was kind of a relief to Clay. That meant he didn't have to have eyes on him all the time and he could take a minute alone.

However, since this was Clay and he was dealing with something, that was not going to be the case. When the family showed up to the large pond that had numerous other families skating around on it, Clay bit his tongue and accepted that he was going to have to follow George's family around like a lost puppy.

"So you're telling me," Erin waddles over to where George and Clay were sitting on a wooden bench, her skates already on and arms held out to balance. "You've never been skating?"

The question was obviously meant for Clay, who was but a simple Florida man who only knew how to tell an alligator and a crocodile apart.

He shakes his head, tying his skate tightly. "Nope, but how hard can it be?"

His friend scoffs next to him. "Please, I've been doing this since I was a kid and I still fall on my butt. Erin's the only one who had lessons."

Erin smiles proudly at herself, flipping her blonde braid over her shoulder.

"Yes, yes- let me know if you two love birds need help balancing," she laughs and looks between the two. Clay's eyebrows raised at the nickname. "Or actually, you guys could just lean on each other. That would be more cutesy, I suppose."

Clay cringed, but he didn't mean to. Erin caught it though, her smile faltered for a second but brightened back up.

"Actually, my plan was just to leave Clay here to fend for himself," George replies with a shrug. George to the rescue!

"What? How could you do that to me?" Clay said. He made sure to put every ounce of sarcasm and ingenuine betrayal as possible in the words. George rolls his eyes at Clay with a big grin.

"Race you to the other side?" Erin said. George, not being able to resist a challenge, leaps up and leaves Clay to figure out how to get from the grass to the icy surface of the pond.

"Wha- dude!" Clay calls for him, his arms thrown up. Okay, now he actually felt betrayed. Also, turns out George being a shitty skater was a big fat lie.

George was already on the ice, hot on Erin's heels and he glides further away with a single push. He turns around to face a shrinking Clay so smoothly, Clay was a little impressed. George was skating backward like it was nothing and waved a dismissive hand at Clay.

That's kinda attractive.

What?

"Figure it out, Mr. Miami!"

Clay groaned at the nickname but shoved himself up, hands gripped tightly on the handles of the bench. He managed to slowly ease himself down to the edge of the pond, the grass offering some slip resistance but he couldn't bring himself to step on the brown ice of the pond.

"You need help there, Clay?" A deep voice says from above him. It was Uncle Ben, looking like a humble Santa on a day off.

"Um-" Someone kill him now. Take a flippin' icicle to his eye- "Yeah, kinda." No use in lying.

"Alright- just- here you go," Uncle Ben says, balancing Clay on the ice and laughing deeply. "Don't worry about it, just keep your back straight and chin up. Push a bit out than straight in and you'll be just fine."

"Thanks," Clay manages to say through his bruised pride. He was 20 and needed help to balance from George's uncle. Seriously, that icicle would be much appreciated right now.

Uncle Ben gives him a toothy grin and slaps him on the back, which sends him down to the ice and now his chin was bruised too.

"Oh man, I'm sorry!" Uncle Ben laughs and a big hand helps him up. Clay can't help but laugh too and Uncle Ben skated away and towards Aunt Lilly, who was talking quickly as he approached.

Okay, time to do this for real.

Clay takes a step and wiggles. Then another shakey one, followed by a more confident one and then he pushes. He shoots forward a few feet, arms pinwheeling and he feels hands grab his shoulders.

"Clay-" George giggles in his ear. "Stop, I can't- I'm going to pee myself."

Clay whips around to find George and Erin, doubled over with laughter, and Clay crosses his arms.

"Well sorry, but someone decided to leave me and, I quote, 'fend for myself'."

"Dude, you push with your feet. It's not hard." George said.

"Well, clearly it is for someone who hasn't touched ice before."

"You've never touched ice? What about the ice that you put in drinks? I see you touch that when you get water."

Oh my fucking- "You know what I mean, George."

"Ah, yes I do." His friend drapes an arm over his shoulder. Clay wants him off, both because he was annoyed by his abandonment and because they were close again.

"We were sent to get you because Aunt Lilly wants to announce something," Erin said behind them and jabs a thumb to the family crowd on the other side of the pond.

Wait- other side?

Clay looks around him and sure enough, they were on the far side of the pond, and Clay somehow skated from one end to the other. Good for him.

Now how was he going to get back without taking twenty minutes? Well a simple, but humiliating, solution was created by Erin.

On his left side, he had George grabbing his elbow and on his right he had Erin. George and Erin would skate beside him, towing Clay to the other side of the pond. It was an interesting minute.

"Everyone knows tag, right?" Aunt Lilly suggests, a dark eyebrow raised as the three of them near.

Oh hell no. Clay was not about to be embarrassed again by "skating" away from grown adults and a teenager, only to be tagged two seconds in. No. Not happening.

But it happened.

It started with Uncle Ben being it and Clay, being blessed with George and Erin, was quickly ushered away from him to the far corner with the chilled air biting his face.

"Okay, just stay here and-" George starts but Erin skates by, grabbing George's hoodie as Uncle Ben goes after them. Clay was glad he wasn't them because it seemed genuinely terrifying to be chased by a man that was mainly muscle and...tallness.

He watches from a safe distance and it was Erin who ended up being tagged, racing after George who was screeching and speeding away with his brown hair flying back. He had a wicked grin on his face as he turned suddenly and Erin sped past him accidentally. Even from across the pond, Clay could see George's bright smile and hear the taunts thrown out to her. He smiled to himself as he watched, a new warmer feeling blooming in his chest.

Erin eventually got George's mom, who tagged George's dad, who then tagged Aunt Lilly. But see here, this was the part where Clay becomes screwed.

She turns her head around, watching her family race to the four corners of the globe and her eyes fall on Clay. Clay freezes as she turns, slowly building speed and he turns to George for help but he was on the other side and was laughing hysterically again at his friend's misfortune.

Thanks for the help, man. Clay thought to himself as he tries to skate away, towards the safety of

the grass but it didn't work. It wasn't long before his wobbly knees stiffed when Aunt Lilly's perfume came from behind and she tapped his shoulder.

"Clay?"

Please let there be another Clay here. "Yes?"

"Do you want to be it?" She asks. Aw, Clay can see that George didn't get the sympathetic trait in his family. Also the tall trait, he apparently missed out on that too.

"Not...really?" He admits and turns to her. He was envious of how easily she stood on the ice, hip cocked and arms folded in determination over her red sweater, with a knowing smirk on her lips.

"Good because I'm willing to make you a deal," she said. Clay eyes her for a second and waits for her to continue, getting ready for whatever horrible thing was about to come.

"I won't tag you because I know this game will go on forever if you were chasing us-" Ouch okay. "-but I do want to tag George."

"So what do you need me to do?" Clay questions. She could honestly go get George herself, she was fast enough.

"Distract him."

Clay's eyes naturally find George's, who was silent from across the pond now, probably wondering why his aunt wasn't tagging him. Seems simple enough, just skate over and pressure George to stand still long enough for Aunt Lilly to tag him.

"Alright, deal."

She smiles big at him. "Good! I hear George is a sucker for kisses,"

And she skates off to pretend to go for Uncle Ben, leaving Clay with a monstrous red face and eyes still glued to George.

He snaps out of it. Just because she said it, doesn't mean he has to do it right? He starts to skate over to George, who was busy moving himself from left to right to try and predict his aunt's moves, and tugs on his shoulder. He doesn't have to do it, just a suggestion.

Just a suggestion, just a suggestion- he chants himself and George turns to him. He looked impressed that Clay had gotten himself over here.

"Hey man-" George throws a glance over to where his aunt is skating around. "What's up? You okay?"

Yeah, totally. I'm just going to talk to you so your aunt can tag you, so please don't move. He wants to say but the words die on his tongue. He watches George's smile turn into something serious and he says something, but Clay just focuses on George's lips and George's words are mute.

Just a suggestion.

Clay's hands slide up to cup George's jaw, his skin cold and George's eyes widen. What is this? Clay didn't remember telling himself to do this.

"Clay, buddy, what are you-"

"Shh, just play along." Clay whispers but to him, it sounds like he didn't say anything at all.

Clay leans in a bit more and he can feel George's warm breath on his mouth.

Just a suggestion.

He ignores the swirl again and the little voice in his head, telling him to pull away.

He sees George's eyes on him. Brown with gold flecks and filled with...something.

He also sees George's aunt coming towards them, a big grin on her face.

He notices how George leans in slightly too, their lips just barely brushing. Clay can feel the electricity zip down his throat.

Just a bit more. Another rings out, this one gentler.

Clay finds himself leaning in a bit more, his body on autopilot, and their red noses brush. Clay can feel George suck in a breath.

It's doesn't have to mean anything. Just a suggestion. He tells himself as their lips officially brush together and Clay can taste the mint on George's lips from his gum. His lips are soft.

Then... they...

...are shoved apart by Aunt Lilly, who very forcefully pushed George down to the ice.

"Ha! I got you!" Aunt Lilly cheers and turns to the rest of the family. "Guys, I got George! Go, George is it!"

She turns to Clay with a wink and a smile. Well, at least he's for sure on her good side now.

Clay stands there and stares at where Aunt Lilly was, blinking once. Twice. Then George shoots past him, sneaking a glance but not stopping.

He sways over the bench, kind of dizzy, and sits again. He watches George glide smoothly across the ice with his iconic big grin, and Clay can feel a clash happening inside himself. A warm and thick force versus a cold and shameful one and it was starting to mess with him.

He takes a moment, taking deep breaths about what almost happened. What could've definitely happened if Aunt Lilly didn't shove George away like that. Clay leans back and covers his face, the dull England sky sprinkling cold snowflakes down on his burning skin. This was getting too real, he was like 99% sure kissing was on the don't list and he really almost just did that. To his best friend. This was all fake but why didn't George pull away? Why didn't Clay just talk to him like he wanted to before something took over? Why didn't George stop him, he knows that this is going too far-

"I know you guys aren't dating," Erin says and sits down next to him. She places her hands down on the rough wood and pulls away with a hiss of pain. "Oh, fuck. A splinter."

Oh, fuck indeed.

## Chapter Notes

Sorry if today's chapter is kinda boring, i struggled with linking things together but i think i got down. Tomorrow's chapter is back to the action with George and Clay.

\*\*\*\*\*

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George woke up at an unholy hour in the morning to find the world around him a shimmery white.

"Clay," he said to the back of his sleeping friend. It was still dark out but the sky was turning a dull blue as the sun started to rise.

"Mm?"

"Get up! It snowed," George says and turns his head back towards the window. The England town was asleep and the house was chilled.

"Uh, no? It's cold and it's like four a.m. Go back to sleep," Clay mutters. George rolls his eyes and walks to his window, staring out at the backyard.

Things have been shockingly normal between them since yesterday's little incident, both mutually agreeing to not talk about it despite not actually saying so out loud. George left Clay alone after that for a while and Clay eventually came back to him after dinner that day, shoving a controller in George's hand with a genuine smile. Although- George wasn't mad at him per se, he was annoyed at how unreadable Clay was being. George couldn't tell if Clay was just playing along or if he was feeling the same thing George felt.

Another thing: George wanted to talk about it. He wanted to ask Clay why he didn't just talk to him and why he went for the kiss option. He wanted to ask him what he was thinking in the few seconds the two got dangerously close and if he was just going crazy. Was Clay playing with him? Did he know?

What was going on with them?

"George?" He hears Clay sit up in the bed. "What are you doing?"

George shrugs on his sweatshirt, flipping the hood up. "I'm going outside,"

"What? Why? It's freezing out there,"

George shoots him a look and presses a finger to his lips, closing the door behind him and leaving his friend. George sneaks his way past his sleeping family and down the stairs, through the heavy front door that led to his little winter wonderland. It was really cold though and he tugs the zipper of his sweatshirt up higher, taking high steps to avoid getting snow in his sneakers.

He kneels down in the crisp snow and feels the crackling of it underneath him in his bones, breath

coming out steady and even. He felt happy and light with the peaceful quietness and cold surrounding him. His eyes slide shut and he tilts his head up to the sky, feeling snowflakes melt on his cheeks before sticking his tongue out.

Thud. George's head snaps up to where the sound came from and saw Clay standing behind the bedroom window, a blanket wrapped around him, and his blonde hair sticking up. He squints up at his friend who was scribbling something in front of him.

You look stupid.

George reads the paper, then reads it again. Well, excuse him for having some innocent fun out in the snow! George raises his fist and flips Clay off, which earns him a laugh George could hear through the window. Clay shakes his head at him with a smile and disappears back into the room.

That was a short-lived interaction.

George tilts his head back again, ignoring the numbing cold reaching his legs, and catches snowflakes on his tongue. It was just when he was feeling the peacefulness again that Clay decides to drop an armful of snow on top of George.

"What the hell, Clay?" George yells, shaking white snow from his hair and standing up. Clay had his hand covering a smug grin. "You had to ruin it for me,"

"I didn't ruin anything, in fact, I think I made it better."

"No, you ruined it." he insisted and the boys look at each other, Clay with a very amused expression and George with a bitter one.

"Don't be like that. Anyways, what were you doing anyway? Eating the air?" Clay says. He bumps shoulders with George.

"Yes, Clay. I was eating the air like people do when it snows." George deadpans and wraps his arms tight around him. It was pretty cold around here.

"You're forgetting I've barely been around snow before,"

"Yeah, but everyone's heard of catching snowflakes with their tongues," George states and turns away from his friend, glancing back behind him. "Mr. Miami or not."

Clay groans. "Again with the nickname? You realize I'm not from Miami, right?"

"Doesn't matter in Florida, everyone's bonkers down there."

"Oh look at me," Clay mocks George. "I'm George and I'm from the United Kingdom, I've grown up surrounded by cold and grey." He then throws snow in George's direction, sprinkling him with white again.

"Grow up, Clay!" George said, his temper leaking into his words. Seriously, what was this? Clay had to be playing him at this point but George had zero ideas on what Clay's version of flirting was. There was one time Clay started talking to this girl but that quickly broke off within a few days, so George can imagine his game can't be that good.

"Whoa, dude. Relax, I was just joking," Clay raises his hands in defense, but his voice softens. "Are you okay?"

No, I want to know what you're thinking. "Yes, I'm fine. Just trying to enjoy the snow." George said. "My friends and I used to do it together whenever we got tired of playing."

"You want to teach me how to catch snowflakes?" Clay offers. This gets George's attention.

"You want me to teach you how to catch snowflakes?" George said, looking bored. Clay nods slowly. Yes, that's what I said, George. "Hm...pass."

"Grea- what?" Clay starts and he walks to his friend. "Dude, come on. Stop it."

"Clay, you open up your mouth and look up. It's not hard."

"But I'm Mr. Miami, remember? George. My buddy. Come on."

Clay sits in the snow and pats the snow next to him. George tried to resist his friend's pats and tried to ignore the rising heat in his cheeks. Clay must've really wanted George to teach how to do a very basic action. George, with a grunt of annoyance, sits next to him.

"Look- like this." George tips his head back again and Clay watches the snowflakes fall and melt on his friend's face and tongue. George's brown hair was sticking out from the top of his hoodie, catching a majority of the flakes.

Clay finds himself leaning close to George but not as close as they were yesterday, just a few inches back. He watched George's face relax as his friend fell back into his childhood habit, snowflakes now gathering on his dark eyelashes. Pretty.

"Okay, got it," Clay says and tips back his head. He feels the small pricks of frost across his face and fall onto his tongue and for a moment, he understood what George meant when he said Clay ruined it. It was pretty relaxing and Clay's heart began to slow a bit, slipping into deep thought.

He wondered if George knew that Erin knows about the act. They had a brief conversation and she had sworn she wouldn't expose them, she would play along right next to them. It felt relieving to Clay, at least someone knew that he didn't mean anything that he did with George and that it was simply acting. He didn't like George like that and he wasn't willing to risk their friendship by thinking otherwise. However, Erin did say a few more things that Clay tried to desperately erase from his mind and ignore the tight swirl replacing the warm bloom.

He feels George's eyes on him and he cracks open his eyes to look at him.

"What?"

George blinks his brown eyes at him. "Nothing, but you're right."

"About what?"

"We do look really stupid when we do that."

Clay wheezed at his grinning friend and tosses more snow at him. "Shut up man, I'm trying."

"You really have to stop throwing snow at me, I'm freezing right now." His friend blows in his hands. Clay studies him for a second, watching his friend's eyes drift back up to the brightening sky and to the skeleton trees.

"I told you it was cold," Clay sighs and tugs off his jacket. "Here, take this."

George watches with wide eyes as Clay awkwardly hands the green jacket to him, Clay suddenly



feeling hot despite his numb fingers. He didn't mean to give his jacket away like that, it's just the polite thing to do. Friends share jackets, it's normal.

"Uh, thanks? I guess," George says slowly, wrapping the jacket around his shoulders as Clay stands. "Where are you going?"

"Back inside, winter is definitely your thing." Clay said. He really left because it was getting too much again and he felt kind of weird for the jacket thing, like he overstepped another boundary.

George's chest warms and he grips Clay's jacket tighter around him, vanilla and cologne surrounding him, and his heart flutters gently in his chest. It was that stupid feeling again, the same one that George felt yesterday when he realized what Clay was gearing up to do. The same sparks zipping down his spine. There was no doubting, George had managed to fall for his best friend in the one week they've been together so far and that had to be on the don't do list. But here they were, sitting in the backyard, and George finally understood what the feeling was when he watched his friend catch the snowflakes.

It settled over him warm at first like he was happy to have finally figured it out, but then it turned sour and made him feel gross. He felt like it was illegal to feel this.

George bites the inside of his cheek, watching his friend hike his way through the snow and ultimately says screw it.

"Clay-"

"George-" Clay turns back around just when George says his name.

"Sorry, you go," George says with a wave of his hand.

"Erin knows, by the way. I don't know if you knew but I figured I would tell you," Clay says and George stares at him for a solid minute. Erin knew a lot of things so he was going to have to be more specific.

"About...what?" George shrugs.

"The act. She knows we aren't dating."

"What? How could she have figured that out? We've been pretty good at hiding it, right?" George's mind rewinds to seeing Clay's face in his, their breaths mingling before being shoved apart. That would've had to sell the act for them, that was as close as they could get without actually doing anything.

"I don't know man, but she said she wasn't going to snitch," Clay says.

"What else did she say?"

It was Clay's turn to rewind to yesterday, Erin's happy smile as she told him she was certain George had feelings for him. But the words hit him like a truck, air rushing out him and his stomach twisting until it hurt. That wasn't supposed to happen, they were supposed to be acting.

"Nothing much, just that really," Clay lied, and thankfully, George bought it. "What'd you want to say?"

George could read his friend's body language. The crossed arms, lips pressed tightly, and his eyes not meeting George's was all code for I really would like to leave right now. Clay interrupting him

was a clear sign that now was not the right time to tell him his feelings.

"I..." Like you. George starts but the words die in his throat. "I forgot what I was going to say."

Clay huffs a small laugh and turns to walk back into the house. "See you later, dude."

George didn't miss the tension leaving Clay's shoulders or eyes when he left.

"Yeah!" George watches his friend disappear. "Totally," he says quietly to himself.

He was still sitting silently in the snow as the sun came up, mind racing through thoughts but continuously stopping at one. Clay did not like him back. Since yesterday, Clay has kept his distance from George and made sure the two of them had enough room to fit a person in between them. Not to mention that George can see Clay's walls up, he was getting more and more uncomfortable with this whole dating act and George wishes he picked someone else. Anyone besides Clay, their friendship meant way too much for him.

Swallowing his feelings down, he traced the zipper of Clay's jacket, feeling the rough teeth against his thumb and he sets his jaw. It's going to be a painful reality for him if he tries with Clay, but it's going to be even more painful if their friendship shattered because of him.

George straightens his back and gazed up at the bedroom window where his friend had returned and he swore to himself, right there and then, that he won't ruin their friendship. George mentally shoves his new feelings down and deep into his chest and heads back inside to face reality.

It was Christmas Eve in George's household and the electricity in the air was enough to leave the hairs on Clay's neck standing. Everyone had been running around for hours since George's mom insisted everyone got up and took part in decorating the house. The twins were sent upstairs to put fake candles in the windows, Uncle Ben and Aunt Lily were in charge of setting up the fake Christmas tree, George's parents in the kitchen with the food and George and Clay were left to-

"George! Hold the ladder straight," Clay said, crushing the garland in his hands. He looks down at his friend, who held the ladder with one hand.

"I am! Your balance is just crap."

Clay holds in his groan and focuses his attention on laying the garland neatly on the windows. When Clay heard they were hanging garland, he thought that George's mom meant inside and over the TV stand or something. No, he was horribly wrong.

After a quick game of Rock, Paper, Scissors- it was Clay who ultimately got sent up. The one guy in the entire household that had a fear of heights, was sent up to do a task that required both hands and an ungodly amount of trust in George. The funny thing was that George was the one who lost the game, but he got shoved up the ladder because of his height.

The ladder beneath his feet quivers and sways and Clay's hands grip the shutters of the windows, snow falling down on top of George's brown hair.

"Hey! Quit dropping snow on me," his friend has the audacity to say to him like George didn't almost drop Clay.

"Hold. The. Fucking. Ladder." Clay pants out, heart hammering and hands shakey. He draws in a quick breath to calm himself and resumes laying the plastic shrub on the window. We're almost done, We're almost done, We're almost done.

"You okay, man?" George calls up to him. Clay sees him take one hand off the ladder.

"Yes! Yes, I'm fine but for the love of God, George, two hands on the ladder." Clay pleads. He hears George mumble something below him but he didn't have the energy to ask what he said. Between Clay's rocky sleep schedule (may or may not be because when he closes his eyes he sees George's face back from at pond) and waking up at five in the morning, he was exhausted and just wanted to lie down for a while.

When the two finally finish and Clay feels the solid ground beneath him again, he was relieved for a solid two seconds before George opened his mouth again.

"See? Was that so hard?"

"I need you to shut up."

"You're fine, you conquered your fear and you lived!"

"Uh, you almost dumped me off the ladder multiple times. If anything, I'm more fearful." Clay scoffs and George rolls his eyes.

"By the way, I wanted to talk to you about something."

Clay throws his head back and groans. "What now?"

"Well, now I'm not going to tell you," George said and Clay looked at his friend. George had that knowing look on his face, he knew Clay was going to want to know what it was and George was just being stubborn.

"Fine! I'm sorry, what did you want to say?"

"I want to adjust some of the rules. For our act." George adds the last part like Clay suddenly had no idea that they were supposed to be 'dating' and needed the clarification.

"Like what?" He said. This could go in a lot of different directions and a majority of Clay wanted it to go in reverse, limiting what they could do even more. George's pickup lines were getting annoying at this point.

"Like-" his friend claps. Clay could tell he was hyping himself up to say whatever it was. "- maybe we could relax some of the boundaries."

Clay stares at him, getting not even a fraction of what he said. "What?"

"Maybe we could...relax? Some of our boundaries?" George said uncertainly and watched his friend's face for any hint of an answer.

"Are you serious?" Clay deadpans. George can't be serious. They agreed on the last set of rules and agreed to keep them in stone to avoid complications. But clearly, George wanted complications.

"Yes! It's not what you're thinking," George says. His cheeks and ears were turning red as Clay waited for him to continue. "Just to sell the act more, you know? Nothing extreme."

"No, dude. We agreed on the rules before- no cuddling, long hugs, no feeding each other, and no kissing." Clay said, ignoring the flinch of guilt in his chest when his friend's face fell in confusion.

"Clay, you realize that you did-"

"Did what? Nothing happened." He denies, pushing quickly past his friend. He wasn't ready to talk about it. He didn't want to talk about it. "Just leave the rules alone, George."

A hand grabs his shoulder and turns him. "Clay, what is your issue? You can't act like you don't know."

"My issue? My friend almost caused me to break my neck on a ladder and I really don't know what you're talking about."

"Why can't we just talk about it?"

"About what, George." Just drop it, please.

"About the pond, Clay! How you knew exactly what you were doing, and now you're hiding from it!" George yells at him and Clay physically moves back. George never yelled at Clay like this. Sure, George yelled a lot but this one was actually at Clay and held so much frustration.

"Let it go, George. It was called playing along and actually, your Aunt suggested I do it. Did you want me to risk exposing us two weeks into this?" Clay responds, his own anger rising. The swirl was back and powerful, spreading from his gut and through his body, leaving a sour taste in his mouth.

"But you're all about following the rules! Why did you still do it?"

I don't know. "Because it's fake. This is all fake. Stop reading into it like we're actually dating and get over it."

He turned on his heel and marched into the house, swallowing the image of George's hurt face, and sat on the living room couch. He rubbed his face aggressively like he was trying to blur himself so no one could recognize him and he could disappear. He came to England with George to help his friend and to see something other than the Florida sun at Christmas, now he was regretting it and feeling way more emotions than he wanted to. George would've found someone else easily, he's George and he knows everyone, so Clay declining would've made no difference.

"Um, excuse me you can't just storm away from me like that," George says above him and Clay removes his face from his hands.

"Yes I can, it's a free countr-"

"We're not in the states anymore, that saying doesn't apply here."

"What do you want, George?" Clay sighs.

"I want you to talk to me. You've been acting so weird and I want to know what's going on." George said. His friend was a stubborn one and Clay used to admire that about him but, right now, it's annoying as fuck.

"Nothing is wrong!" He throws his hands up.

"Clay, I've known you for a while now and I can safely say you're not acting right."

"Not act- not acting right?" Clay says exasperated and he stands up against George. "I am acting fine, it's you that's acting weird. Don't think I don't notice things either, George. I see you watching me, I know you-"

"Don't say it," George says and Clay sees bright anger enter his friend's eyes. Clay leans down a bit to his friend's face, the sparks that were once there gone completely.

"Aw, why? Does it make you uncomfortable to acknowledge something, George?" He hisses. Erin's words were echoing in his skull. I'm certain he likes you, my cousin doesn't look at anyone else the way he looks at you.

"Shut. Up."

"No. You wanted me to talk? Fine, I'll talk-"

Then two hands slam on his chest and he's flying backward on the couch, George's cold hands clamped tightly on Clay's wrist that was raised in a fist. Clay shoves George off of him and shoots up, fists balled and bitter anger boiling his blood and George moves. He balls Clay's t-shirt in his fist and tugs him down, unfamiliar, but matching anger in George's eyes.

"Mum!" A tiny voice calls behind them and the boys turn to Mary. She was standing in her nightgown, big eyes wide and nervous and probably wondering why they were two seconds away from beating one another if they were supposed to like each other.

Rose emerges in the doorway and looks at George and Clay, who were still poised and ready to kill each other. Her face drops and she walks over to them, George already untangling himself from

Clay's shirt.

"Boys! What is going on?" She asks. "Sit down, both of you."

Clay was a bit embarrassed honestly. He hasn't been yelled at by a parent in a while and he was supposed to be an adult, but here he was getting scolded by George's mom.

"George, what happened?" She turns to her son. He was hunched over and at the far side of the couch from Clay. "You know I don't tolerate fighting."

"Nothing, mum. We were just messing around." She turns from George to Clay, blue eyes asking the same question.

"Yeah...just messing around." Clay agrees quietly, picking at the hem of his t-shirt.

"Boys, I've been married for 23 years now and I know a fight when I see one." She starts, sitting on the chair across from them. "Now, what is going on?"

"Mum, seriously. Nothing is happening. Clay and I just got frustrated and it came out wrong." George said. They exchange a silent conversation between them and Clay was fidgeting uncomfortably. This is it. This is when we get caught and all because George couldn't leave things alone. Nice going, idiot.

"Well, if that's the case- which I doubt by the way but we'll come back to it later- then it sounds like you guys need dance therapy."

"Dance...what?" Clay says, watching Rose move the radio that was sitting on a bookshelf.

"Dance therapy," George repeats and looks at Clay. "She and my dad used to do this whenever they got mad at each other and 'danced their hardships away'."

"Clay, come stand here." Rose motions to the right of her. He stands next to her and places his hand on top of her perched one, feeling naked. "Alright, now Georgie."

Clay bites back a snicker at the nickname which earns him a passionate glare of hatred from his friend. Damn, he really was pissed.

"Steve? Steve, we need you in the living room." Rose calls and a grunt of acknowledgment is heard. She then takes Clay's and George's hands, lining them up palm to palm, and takes a second to fix her short hair and pinch her cheeks up.

"You look great mum, don't worry," George says, making a point to not look at Clay. His voice was soft and tired, making the twinge of guilt return in his chest. George was just as tired as Clay is and was just used as Clay's punching bag outside. But then again, it was vice versa.

Steven walks in, bowing down slightly to fit in the doorway and he looks around the room. His eyes fall to the two boys standing in the middle, palms pressed together but bodies and heads turned far away from each other.

The swirl returns and Clay prays that the glint in George's dad's eyes wasn't of disgust or feeling weirded out.

"Dance therapy?" He says, his voice deep and strong and Rose nods excitedly. George was really missing out on the good genes.

The radio clicks and soft Christmas music warms the air. Clay watches dumbly as Rose and Steve dance together, swaying gently to the music and Rose with a mushy look printed on her face. They want them to do that?

Clay turns to George who had a panicked look on his face.

"Come on! Don't be shy," Rose encourages in a twirl.

"Do we have to?" George asks and his mom shoots him a look.

"Be a gentleman, George." His dad says. George was silent for a moment, hand still stiff against Clay's.

He's really going to make me do it, huh. Clay thought and he pushed the swirl down to the pit of his stomach, taking comfort in the mentality that he would be acting.

He locks his fingers with George and pulls him close, and places his other hand on George's back. For a second, their breaths mingle again but George pulls back slightly to give them room. Clay felt his heart going crazy.

"Clay, what are you-"

"Dance therapy, duh." He says then he whispers, "The quicker you follow along, the less awkward this has to be."

George presses his lips together but lets Clay guide him around the room, both still looking everywhere but at each other. Hobbling back and forth and side to side.

"Loosen up! It's like you guys aren't even dating," Rose jokes. This makes them look at each other in an Oh shit kinda way. It's amazing how his family hasn't picked up on this yet.

Clay can see something in George give as the music picks up into a lightheaded tone, trumpets and bells twinkling and Clay finds himself watching his friend.

George was a very real person, solid in his arms and hands soft and warm again in his, with brown eyes looking back at Clay and lips tugging into a smile. George, his best friend and his ride or die, had gotten them in this crazy mess, and Clay couldn't help but think that this was supposed to happen.

"What are you looking at?" George says softly, nudging Clay with his shoulder.

"I wish I could say not you."

Clay can see more pink rise in his friend's cheeks and his gears turning, processing the comment before glaring.

"You're an idiot, Clay."

"Yeah, you've said that once or twice."

"Look, Clay, if you don't want to talk about it that's fine. I won't push if you don't want to talk about it."

"I don't trust you on that," Clay jokes. "But thanks, I guess."

"And know that I'm here to talk. We are supposed to be friends, right?"

"Oh yeah, totally." Clay bit his cheek to ignore the bile creeping up.

George was a bit disappointed Clay didn't offer any more insight, but he knew better than to push. George could tell that his friend wasn't ready to talk about whatever it was that was nothing him, and he just needed to respect that.

However, long after the music ended and the boys thanked Rose for her helping, Clay still felt George's weight in his arms and the familiar warmth in his chest. As Clay walked up to George's room for a moment to process all that happened in the morning, something in him broke open and his heart started beating a bit more freely as he remembered his friend's face.



## Chapter Notes

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someone asked for some cuddling so i sprinkled a little bit in here :)

The sun wasn't even up yet when George heard his sibling's little footsteps tear down the hallway and his door slam open against his wall. Mary jumped up on George's back, her bony knees digging right into his pressure points, and Jack yanked on his exposed arm.

"Guys, no. Not this again," George begs sleepily, forcing his eyes open to his sister's brilliant grin.

"Georgie, Santa came! Mum said you had to get up for us to open our presents," she said. Her breath reeked of cereal and cookies and he wondered why his mother would give them sugar this early. His eyes fall back shut. Maybe if he pretended to sleep they would leave?

"Wake up!" His brother yells in his ear, tugging his shoulder to make him rollover. "Wake up Clay too. Mum says you both need to get up."

George mumbles something and he feels Clay peek over his shoulder at the kids.

"Is Erin awake yet? Go wake her up," he said with a rough sleepy voice, dragging a hand down his face. George opens one eye to sneak a glance at his friend, the pillow they put between them last night blocking most of his view. Yes, they put a pillow wall down. No, that didn't stop George from kicking Clay at night.

The twins exchange glances and leap off of George, using his back as a launchpad, and George gives a small cry of pain. Gummy bears and nightmares, that is how he would describe the twins.

"Damn it, now I can't fall back asleep." Clay groans next to him. George had to agree with him on that one and he sat up, yellow light from the hallway coming in. "What time even is it?"

"Guess," George said, his phone burning his eyes into small crisps.

"Mm, six?"

"Try five."

"In the morning?" Clay gasps painfully. George knew Clay was a sleeper, going to bed early and sleeping late and always in a napping mood.

"No, at night," George responds sarcastically and twists out of bed. "Feel free to stay here, I'll spare you from their second visit."

"I'm coming, hang on," Clay says. The two make their way down the stairs before flopping down on the couch in exhaustion.

"Good morning sleepyheads," Erin says, sipping her coffee and sitting on the arm of the couch.

George spares her a glance of acknowledgment and Clay raises his hand in a lazy wave. "I heard you tried to throw me under the bus with the twins, Clay."

"I swear it was just to get them out of the room," his friend explains and she scoffs.

"Please, George tried to do the same thing last year. I'm surprised he didn't tell you that I'm up and ready before the twins."

"Doesn't matter, it worked and now we're here," Clay responds.

"Yes, but they know I'm always up before them."

"They still went for you and it bought us time to wake up on our own." George agrees with Clay. Erin looks at the two for a while, tongue in cheek and her gaze lingering on Clay, and she sighs.

"Fine, whatever. Merry Christmas, losers." She stalks off to the kitchen where the rest of the family was. "And don't think I won't sick the twins on you next time either!" She calls back.

"What was that about?" George asks Clay once she disappears. Clay turns his head, eyes shut.

"What was what?"

"You and Erin, don't think I didn't see you guys stare at each other for like two hours," George said. Clay opened his eyes and looked at his friend with a mocking face.

"Why? Are you jealous?"

Okay, yes kind of. George felt the green-eyed monster claw at his poor heart but it didn't matter. George knew better than to advance on his friend and he knew his cousin, but there was something definitely going on between them and George wanted to know.

"No, of course not. I just want to know what was with the secretive glance."

"Dude, I have literally no idea what you're talking about," Clay said, leaning deeper in the couch. George leans back next to him and stares at the glistening lights on the tree, presents stacked underneath it, and a fake fire playing on the TV.

George and Clay were back to being peaceful again, although George has had the looming feeling of frustration and anger follow him around and he didn't want to let go of the whole thing quite yet. He had more things he wanted to say to his friend and something told him that Clay was quickly picking up on George's choked down feelings- so he wanted to desperately sit down and talk to him. Maybe he could talk himself out of his feelings if Clay allowed him to.

When the twins came rushing into the room and started passing gifts out, Clay was still feeling the ache of yesterday in his bones despite things being pretty okay between him and George. But that was the problem, you see. It was just okay, they didn't hate each other but they weren't exactly back on good terms again and Clay hated it. He had the need to be on George's good side and the nag to apologize was digging its nails into Clay's mind, however, he couldn't bring himself to. It's like something was forcing him to keep the mental distance away from George and no matter how hard Clay ignored and swallowed it down, it was still very much there and powerful.

Clay blinks back to reality when Jack crawls up to him, plopping a small box in his lap.

"To Clay, from George." Jack reads the label with his innocent smile on his face. Oh, to be a kid on Christmas day, blind to problems and acts around you. Clay ruffles his hair and Jack crawls back to

his sister, who was guarding the high pile of gifts with the shark plushie gripped tightly in her little fist.

Clay starts to tear at the gift, hands shaking slightly as the family around him watched quietly.

"Oh my god, Clay. Just open it, it's not going to blow up," George says.

"Can't be too safe around you, George. We never know with you," Erin said from the floor. Even though she wasn't in the house during their blow-up, Erin still picked up on whatever negative tension there was.

George gives her a funny look but doesn't say anything. Clay resisted the urge to crawl into his skin and hide from everyone, his heart fluttering slightly and body temperature rising as he felt George's eyes on him.

"This is getting sad, Clay," George states with a groan.

"Dude, you used the whole tape dispenser on it," Clay responds as he pulled off the remaining wrapper and Aunt Lily barks a laugh, covering her grin from her glaring nephew.

"I did not! You just suck at doing basic things." Like recognizing feelings. George added bitterly to himself.

"Sorry, but I do have to agree with Clay. Your wrapping is pretty bad. It's just tape and an excessive amount of layers of the wrapping paper," Aunt Lily said.

"What'd he get you, Clay?" Rose says, interrupting George's retort. Clay turns the plastic box over, a neon green phone case enclosed inside.

"Its heat reacted. Turns yellow or something whenever you touch it," George explains with a wave of his hand, seemingly uninterested. Clay traces his finger down the sharp plastic and snorts.

"Thanks, dude. I've been meaning to get a new case and it fits with my whole green brand."

George turns to him. "You really like it? Like actually?"

"Yes! Why do you sound so suspicious?" Clay shoots him a genuine smile, trying to show George that things were good between them. That the whole thing was water under the bridge and they could go back to being friends now. For a flash, Clay saw one of George's smiles creep up but then it was gone as quickly as it came.

"I don't know, I just never been good at giving gifts I guess." His friend turns from him again, breaking off the connection. George's family exchange small looks to each other and Erin taps Jack's shoulder.

"Hey, delivery boy! Where are George's gifts from Clay?" Erin saves the room from the heavy air and Jack turns to get Clay's present. Which, he can't lie, was wrapped just as bad as George's. Jack darted over to the back of the tree, ornaments bouncing from his reaching, and he tosses George a long box.

"Clay, why is only half of it wrapped?" George asks, flipping the box on it's back to expose the white container. Clay shrugs and George's family chuckles, George simply pulling off the top of the box with the wrapping paper tearing in a perfect line.

"See? Even with your terrible wrapping, I still opened it before- oh," George starts but stops, as he

looks down at the box. Clay smiles, watching his friend pull out the glasses.

Clay saw them in the prop store, lowkey. It was kinda ironic to find them there and it happened to be on his Minecraft skin, so when Clay placed his money on the counter for the glasses it seemed too good to be true.

"I- where did you get these?" he asks as he slides them on, the thick white frames blocking his face.

"Are those...clout goggles?" Erin questions, squinting at her cousin.

"Yes, and the prop store," Clay answers both of them, watching fondly as his friend looks around the room with them. "Now you match your skin on Minecraft."

"Seems like you two had the same idea with the whole brand thing," Rose said. She appeared happier that the boys were edging back to their normal ways.

"Except mine was better," George said. Clay's smile drops into a thin line and feels completely done with his friend. Of course he had to say that.

"Uh, no. I'm closer to your actual brand, dude," he says. George looks at him with those ridiculous glasses for an uncomfortable amount of time. "George, what the hell are you doing?"

"I'm rolling my eyes at you-" he pulls down his glasses to Clay his eyes and he rolls them dramatically. "-see?"

Clay can't help but wheeze. "You're an idiot, George."

George had a goofy grin on his face and he felt relief explode brightly in Clay's chest, watching his friend ease into a conversation his family was having and fidgeting with the glasses. Despite that, all good things must die for Clay and he felt that sickening swirl again. Clay wasn't upset with it anymore, he was getting more annoyed that it kept him from appreciating his friend from a distance. It popped up whenever he felt something positive for his friend stir and he was getting real tired of ignoring it. There's nothing wrong with liking your friend. In a friendly way though- Clay didn't like him like that.

"Clay, I need help upstairs," Erin says and he looks at her.

"Okay?" He's a little (a lot) confused.

"I need you to come help me," she says slowly and Clay impulsively looks at George for a response, but he was busy with Mary and her shark.

Clay stands and George finally notices his friend and he pulls the glasses up to his hair, causing it to go in different directions.

"Where are you going?"

"Erin needs help with something."

George watches them walk out of the living room and when they enter the hallway upstairs, Erin stops and turns to Clay.

"Okay, you went from looking really happy to really sick in three seconds. What's wrong Clay." She says it as a statement like she didn't need to ask if anything was wrong because she knew for a

fact there was something up. Damn, nothing went by this girl.

"Nothing? I'm just enjoying-"

"Cut the bullshit. With all due respect, you might as well shout you like George too from the rooftops then jump from them. That's the vibe I'm getting." She said, arms folded across her chest and Clay's mouth drops open.

"I don't like George!"

"Yes you do, you doofuses look at each other the same way. If I didn't know otherwise, I would've actually thought you guys were dating. Why do you always look like you would rather vomit than look at him?"

"Erin, stop. Please," Clay sighs. He couldn't even enjoy talking to his friend anymore with the swirl, this whole thing was going to ruin his view on his friend.

"Clay, seriously. What is up?" Her voice was soft and Clay sighed again. Standing there in the hallway, nowhere to run to and no use lying to her, he begins to talk.

"I can't describe it honestly. It's like this sick feeling in my stomach whenever people have to watch us act, yet I barely feel it when it's just him and I."

She's quiet so Clay continues. "When we first started the act, it was simple. He would flirt and I would laugh and that would be enough. We wouldn't push it and I didn't feel anything at the time. But then you guys show up and I get nervous you guys won't...like it?"

"Not like it?" She blinks and her arms drop. "Clay, do you think we're homophobic?"

"No! No, but in my mind I do. You know?" He explains and it hangs in the air for a second. He felt a dull thud of realization. "In my mind."

"If you don't mind me asking, why do you think that?" she asks. Clay knew why he thought it and everything came crashing down on him, blows of memories and his perfectly constructed self shattered. "We love George and we wouldn't act like that to you guys especially."

"No, I know." he starts. His mouth feels like it was stuffed with cotton balls. "I came home one day from elementary school. I remember I said something about liking a boy in that class and my parents freaked out."

"Freaked out how?"

It was not a good freak out, his dad yelled at him and threaten to put soap in his mouth for saying he liked a boy. His mother told him about the other pretty girls in his grade, but how was he supposed to know better? He wasn't any older than the twins at that point, yet they pressured him into thinking it was wrong to even look at a boy.

"Badly. Look, I really don't want to talk about this," he set his jaw, meeting Erin's brown eyes. She and George looked eerily very similar.

"Clay-"

"No, Erin. I appreciate you trying to help out, but this is getting way too complicated," he starts to walk by and head down the stairs. "George and I are acting and I really don't get why everyone looks into it that much."

"So what? You're going to hide?"

"If it means keeping our friendship," he turns to her and locks eyes, not daring to look away. "Then yes."

There had been another instance after the one in elementary school, this one happening a few years later in middle school. Another beautiful sunny day in Florida turned into a harsh and unbearable brightness once his parents threaten to send him to his grandparents when he tried to tell them he liked boys too. Give up your feelings and be 'normal' or leave your life behind and go somewhere else, away from his own family. That was the deal.

"Clay? Are you okay, dear?" Rose asks as he stands in the doorway of the living room. He felt empty at the painful memory and he knew deep down there was nothing wrong with him, but there was no way he was going to accept it at this point.

"Yeah! Never been better, actually." He lies, taking a seat next to George on the floor. George still had the glasses on his head and was handing Jack fake plastic tools, pretending to fix up one of Mary's trucks.

"Are you sure?" George asks, looking over his shoulder with one of his rare concerned faces.

"Yes, dude. All good," Clay assures. It seemed to be easier to lie to him lately, not even just to George actually- in general, it has gotten easier.

His friend studies him for a moment, trying to read through his stiff face and Clay plays with a screwdriver on the floor, trying desperately to keep his perfect walls up and put forward the Clay people wanted him to be.

"You know, there's a TV in the office. Why don't you two peel away from us and go watch something?" George's dad suggests, rocking gently in the chair next to Rose. George's dad didn't talk much but so far his words have been positive which soothed Clay a bit.

"You want to?" George asks, his voice gentler but with just enough force to only let Clay know he knew something was wrong. To his family, they were both peachy keen.

"I guess, yeah," he says with a shrug. George leads him into, what Clay assumed was, his dad's office. It was cluttered, papers scattered on a desk in the corner, and the TV stand filled with thick books with yellowed paper sticking from them. A small tan couch sat across from the TV and a red blanket was bundled on the far left, left unfolded from its last use.

Clay stepped over papers on the floor, nervous to accidentally crumple something important but George marches right through.

"Are you going to tell me?" George asks. Clay settles down on the couch watching his friend flip through movie CD's and he considered doing so. Maybe if he talked to George his feelings would straighten themselves out.

"Not right now, George." Clay chickens out. His friend would just pity him and he didn't want pity- he didn't need the pity. He figured himself out a long time ago and it needed to stay that way, for his sake.

George didn't say anything, not giving away his thoughts and let Clay be to wallow in whatever was bothering him. Even though it was eating him alive to know what was going on, especially between him and Erin, he left it alone. Clay really hit him where it counted yesterday, and George would be lying if he said he didn't still feel the sting of his friend's words.

It's all an act, he really did need to let things go. So in a way, he figured Clay was right.

"I picked Rudolph. I hope that satisfies your deepest wishes," George jokes.

"You didn't even ask me what I wanted to watch though?"

"I figured Rudolph was a good Christmas movie. And I did ask you but you said not right now, so eat your words and suck it up and watch the deer." George said. He needed to be a friend first and act as normal as possible, even if it means being a huge dick to him. Just because Clay was cranky didn't mean he got a pass from George.

"What are you- George!" Clay wheezes, his wide grin returning. "You know exactly what I meant."

"Yeah, I know you meant that I have the superior movie taste and wanted me to pick. Don't worry, I get it."

"Superior taste? George, you don't even watch movies that often. How can you have a taste if you've seen a total of seven in your life?" Clay laughs and George lands a punch in Clay's arm.

"Shut up, idiot. It's still better than whatever your taste is."

"I am willing to bet you my whole apartment that my taste is better."

"Might as well just give me the key now then," George said. "Now for real, shut up. It's starting."

"This is cheesy, George," his friend yawns but his eyes were watching the screen intently, the dullness in his eyes easing into a comfortable relaxed state. Not that George noticed or anything. The boys watched the movie, eyelids growing heavy in contrast to the rising sun, and a golden orange spilled over them. George, again, found his eyes drifting to his friend.

Clay was on the edge of sleep. Leaning down towards George without really noticing, head threatening to fall down on George's shoulder at the drop of a hat and George felt a bubble of heat pop in his chest. He was faced with a very difficult choice here: let his friend suffer a cramped neck or become Clay's pillow for a moment. He knows he shouldn't, but he can't just let his friend's neck cramp up. Right? He was right. That would make him a bad friend if he let Clay get a stiff neck. And George wasn't a bad friend, he was doing the right thing.

As Clay began to drift, George leaned into his friend slightly and in a twist of events, Clay cuddled up into George's shoulder and he could feel his friend's breathing on his neck. Well, that was easier than expected-

-but holy fuck, George's heart was about to explode from how hard it was pounding.

George traced his fingers down Clay's arm, tangling their fingers together and he gave Clay a squeeze of reassurance even though Clay was out like a light at this point. George sat there for a few minutes, staring at the screen but not being able to hear anything besides his heart, and he laid his head against his friends. Clay's hair was soft against George's cheek and he found himself beginning to drift off, blinking against the orange glow of the room.

When Rose walked in to check on them later that morning, she found the movie off and the two boys leaning against each other with their hands still together and in a blissful sleep.

It took Clay a week and a half to figure out that the third car in the driveway was George's, not his extended family's.

"Yeah, Georgie's car is the blue one behind mine," Rose had said to them over breakfast. Clay and George were arguing about what exactly they wanted to do that day, bouncing between going back out to town or staying in and playing Minecraft again.

"You can drive?" Clay responded bewildered, giving his friend a weird look. He has not once seen his friend behind a driver's wheel and couldn't even begin to imagine it.

"Duh," He said. "Although, I guess it is pointless to have one in the U.K, everything is within walking distance and we have taxis everywhere."

"No, I don't believe you. No way. No, you can't drive. You always ask me for rides back in America?"

"That's because I'm too lazy to learn how to drive in the states," George explained. "Everything is flipped and I can't be bothered. Plus, I can save money on gas."

Clay felt so used and lied to. "I still refuse to believe you can drive."

"Oh he can, he's actually quite good." Rose butts in, taking a long sip of her coffee. "Georgie, why don't you take Clay out on the backroads? It'll get you two sometime away from the rest of us."

Clay watched his friend debate, eyes staring at the air like the answer was going to show itself to him.

"I mean, it's something to do right?" He says.

"I'm not sure I feel comfortable with you at the wheel."

"Clay, I'm a great driver. Don't worry."

But oh, Clay had a lot to worry about with George at the wheel. It felt dirty to be sitting in the driver's seat as the passenger and when they got in the car, George put the car in the wrong goddamn gear.

"George!" Clay shouted as the car rolled forward towards his mother's car, dangerously close to colliding.

"Stop screaming! I got this," George said as they backed out. Clay wheezed at his friend's simple mistake and George hits him blindly, not taking his eyes off the road.

And that's how they got into this little situation. It started normally obviously, Clay working aux (which ended up breaking. Go figure.) and pretending not to be freaking out over George's fast turns and hard breaks- until it wasn't normal. Until things got very, really, not normal.

The two drove by the pond, talking shallowly about when George learned to drive and the horror stories attached to the backroads.

"Okay, let's not talking about this. Please," Clay said as he watched the familiar surroundings turn into dense trees and cracked forgotten roads. Road signs were worn out and it seemed dark despite



the sun being high in the sky.

"What? Hearing about kidnappings and dead bodies doesn't set the mood for you?" George joked, rolling to stop at a stop sign. "Look don't worry about it, they only found one body back here."

"ONLY ONE?" Clay yelled, whipping his head to his friend. "George, what the hell? Don't joke about that, say sike right now."

"Okay! Okay, just jokes man. But seriously stop screaming, it's promoting distracted driving and then we'll crash and die." George said, hands flat on top of the wheel. "It was more like two anyways..." his friend adds under his breath.

Clay groans but turns back to the window, not bothering to feed into George's stories. On the plus side, the scenery was pretty even though it was a perfect setting for a horror movie. The trees were a deep emerald green that reached up and over the road, shadows of leaves falling over George's focused face. It's been a few days since he had that talk with Erin and he gets the vibe that George knew something was going on, but he was keeping his mouth shut and leaving it alone. But Clay still felt the crippling guilt of not telling his best friend and instead told someone he didn't know very well.

"Alright, you've been way too quiet Clay. What's the issue?" George asks, sneaking a glance towards his friend and muting the radio. What the hell, could George read minds?

"Noth-"

"If you say nothing I will pull over this car, and I will lock the doors, and we won't leave until you say what's wrong."

"Dude, you can't just trap me like that!" Clay says but he wheezes. He wouldn't actually do that, his friend had higher morals than that... right?

"You really wanna test it?" George said, the car rapidly slowing down and Clay looked back and forth between the road and his friend.

"Uh, no. Wait-"

"Oops!" George says, flipping the blinker to show that he's pulling over. "Start talking and maybe I'll keep driving."

"It's really nothing though. I swear."

"Clay, I know you. As much as you don't want me to, I know when something is bothering you and it's been driving me crazy watching you sulk around the house."

"What?" Clay blinks at his friend. "I don't sulk-"

"Please. Don't think I don't worry about you because I do, friend or not, I want to help." George scoffs. Clay lets the words sink in. His friend's tone was harsh and strong but Clay knew deep down that he was scared for him and cared a lot.

"George, I'm sorry but I'm just not ready." Clay offers softly and George's jaw twitches.

"Clay. When are you going to be ready? Please talk to me, dude." George said, hands tightening on

the steering wheel and his voice broke at the last part. Clay watches silently and in shock at his friend, but George stares forward with the threatening blinker still winking at him. He was waiting to see if George was going to break in front of him, but nothing came after. Just the ringing silence in the car.

After a moment, George lets out a huff and shakes his head. "Fine."

He pulls the car over on the side of the road and breaks hard. He puts the car in park, pressing the lock button, and unbuckled his seatbelt and turns to Clay.

"George, this is not fair-"

"Look I don't mean to be pushy or stubborn or what ever other words you're thinking in your head. But can you at least understand that you not talking to me and going to my cousin you've known for like five days, hurts? It hurts because now I feel like you don't trust me and I know I can be mean at times but-"

"Okay! George breathe." Clay says and he places a hand on his friend's arm. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize that you were hurt by that."

"Well I am and I would really appreciate if I could be let in on it"

"It's really hard for me to say without...like-" Clay struggles to find the words, his hand retreating and scratching the back of his neck. "It's hard to say without you taking it in the wrong way."

"Clay, we've been friends for years now. I don't think anything at this point you say can shock me." George reminds him.

"Oh my god, I don't know how to start," Clay said and slammed his head back on the car's headrest. "I guess I sort of carry this viewpoint with me?"

"You're homophobic, aren't you?" George jumps to it and he groans loudly, hands running down his face in defeat. "Oh, I should've known! That's why you've been so weird, oh my go- Clay I'm so sorry. I didn't know-"

"No!" Clay bots upright and pulls his friend's hands away from his face, holding them to his chest. "No! Oh my god, no George. I'm not homophobic. Well- maybe? I guess in a way I mean."

George studies his face, hands limp in Clay's, and he finally squints at him. "I'm confused?"

"Yeah, so am I. That's what I'm trying to say," Clay nods, a feverish blush creeping up on to his neck.

"I'm still really lost, what do you mean?"

"Like, it makes me feel really weird when we have to pretend in front of your family and stuff. A part of me whats them to know that this is fake and that we aren't dating and we're just friends." Clay says slowly, dancing around a certain fact he did not want to say.

"Well yeah, that's kinda how this goes. I'm sorry it's making you uncomfortable but you agreed to do this," George said. His shoulders dropped in disappointment at his friend, he honestly thought Clay would be able to see past that or at least not feel weird. Now George felt ashamed for pushing his friend into this, he knew it was a bad idea.

"No, you're still not getting it."

"Then explain it better, Clay. You suck at this." George says, taking note that Clay was still holding his hands to him. Nothing like being confined in a car during a heart to heart with your buddy, who you like, deep down.

"Don't take this the wrong way or out of context." Clay sighs. "But when I'm with you, it's so natural and it's weird. I don't like it but at the same time, I do. I really like being with you George."

George fell silent, words disappearing from his brain and mouth forgetting to move. To be fair, how was he not supposed to take that out of context?

"So," George finally says after a minute. "You're uncomfortable but at the same time you aren't?"

Clay nods and George's face drops in annoyance.

"Still doesn't make sense, Clay,"

"That's because I'm not sure how I feel about this whole thing."

"That makes two of us, you think I'm not struggling here too?" George blurts and snaps his mouth shut, eyes wide.

"Wait, what? What's up with you?"

"Ever since that day at the pond," George says quickly. "It's like I don't know where we stand. I know we're friends and I know you said it was for the act but like, why? We agreed it was a don't do thing but you still went for it and I don't understand how you're so chill about all of this because you're confusing the fuck out of me, Clay." It was word vomit and George knew it. Clay's hands let go of George's wrists and he pulls his hands away quickly.

"I never wanted to confuse you, George," Clay said. "I just wanted to protect you from any suspicion."

"Yeah, no. I realize that." He winced at how sharp his voice was. "You keep doing these...these things, though. And it's like you don't even care or bother to acknowledge it." Let's not forget about the pond moment and the snuggle session at Christmas, it was a growing list.

"That's because I don't want to if I'm honest. Look, I'm sorry. I'll take it down a few notches, I didn't realize-"

"No that's not what-" I want. That's not what I want, Clay. George chokes on the words. "Clay, I want you to be as comfortable as possible doing this since this is asking a lot, so please just tell me exactly what bothers you."

"It's nothing you're doing, it's me. It's all completely me." Clay mumbles.

"You're confusing me, Clay."

"I'm sorry."

"Why can't you tell me? I feel like I'm missing something."

"I'm sorry." Clay repeats. His voice was dull and he had turned back to the window with a dead gaze. His walls were back up and George wanted them down again, he wishes he had a hammer and he could break through to his friend.

"I'm here if you have more to say, Clay. I'm your friend and I still want you to be happy," George

finishes, watching his friend. The air was heavy and suffocating, so many unspoken things hanging between them that were unreadable. George knew his feelings, but did Clay?

George moves his hand to change gears, continuing this ruined drive since his mother wasn't expecting them back for a while and if they went back like this, it wouldn't end well.

"George, I'm lying to myself," Clay says, voice barely above a whisper.

"I think we both are." He starts to move the car.

"I feel so gross fake flirting and holding your hand-"

"Way to rub salt into the wound, Clay." He turns to check his blind spot before pulling onto the road.

"-But I also feel like there's something deeper. You make me feel really happy, George."

George freezes, back still turned to his friend and he fights down a red face. He swallows before responding with, "Yeah, that's what friends do. It's our job to make sure we aren't killing each other and ourselves."

"George?" Clay said smoothly, voice low. Okay, Clay needed to stop saying his name like that, or George was going to get it legally changed.

George finally turns to his friend, who was leaned over the cup holders with determined eyes linked to his. George starts to sweat. What the fuck was going on here?

Clay leans in further and George finds himself being pulled in, Clay's hand pulling on his sweatshirt. George wants to resist, he really did. Because he knew what this was going to do to them and his feelings. He was going to go back to being lost and Clay was going to go back and shrink into himself with those walls up.

But yet, he let Clay pull him in and stop him when their noses brushed, and his eyes flick down to his friend's lips. This didn't feel very friend-like, though. George held his breath and tilted his chin up to meet Clay's eyes, who were watching him carefully with a small flicker of uncertainty. George, however, could be very certain about something right now.

"Clay," he says quietly, muscles wound tight and unmoving like he was trying not to scare a rabbit. A Clay sized rabbit. "What are you doing?"

"I don't know." But George leans in closer. So close, he could feel Clay's lips move above his.

Clay tilts his head to the side and slowly lets go of George's sweatshirt, watching and seeing if George was going to take the opportunity to pull away and end this madness. George didn't though, mirroring Clay's movements and he feels hands snake up and cup his jaw again. His hands were freezing against George's burning face and it burned in the best way possible.

They both start to close the gap, George's heart and mind racing in sync and blood roaring in his eyes, and George's eyes slip shut. He could just barely feel Clay's press gently on his- then his phone buzzes.

His eyes snap back open and Clay pulls away faster than George can process, turning back towards the trees, and George thought for a second he imagined the whole thing.

His phone buzzes again and he snaps out of it, pressing his phone to his ear.

"Y-yeah?" His voice was shaky and he coughs.

"How far from home are you two?" Clay could hear Erin's voice on the phone.

"Not very far. Why?" George answers, already starting to turn the car around.

"Please for the love of God, come home." She begs and the twins can be heard shouting in the background followed by a loud crash.

"Did something happen? Are you okay?" George asks panic leaking into his voice.

"Everything's fine, I'm just tired of watching the twins and Aunt Rose said you call you guys to help."

George rolled his eyes, frustration pricking his skin. She sent them out to be alone then volunteered them to come back and help. How kind of her.

"Fine, we're coming back."

Erin says thank you and then gets cut off by another loud noise and the line dies. George sighs deeply that turns into a small muffled scream and Clay turned his head to look at his friend.

"Dude, what's the issue?"

"You-" George said, holding a hand to Clay. "-Need to shut up for a few minutes and let me think."

"Alright, alright. I'm sorry," Clay responds and George heard the guilt in his voice. Oh good, he didn't imagine it. They were really just about to- wow. George really sucked at repressing his feelings because he really jumps at any chance he had with his friend.

The drive back was silent but surprisingly, the air cleared a bit and George did take comfort in knowing Clay felt what George was feeling- even if it was just a little bit- George didn't feel as crazy about his feelings now.

As they pulled into the driveway and George parked the car, neither of them moved to get out.

"Do you think you'll want to talk about things later?" George said to his friend. Clay unbuckles and gives him a smile, a real one in George's eyes.

"Maybe later." Well, at least it wasn't a never and George smiled back, a smile that stayed on his face for hours after.

## Chapter Notes

yall want kisses?? i'll deliver :) i feel bad for egging you on. love u guys <3

"I see you found the swing set," George called to Clay from the back porch. It was fairly late at night and a few days after their conversation in the car. George had tried to reach into Clay again but with no luck.

"It's a nice set," Clay calls back and tapped his hand against the rickety wooden pole. The whole thing looked like it was ready to collapse at any second, in George's eyes, but he assumed Americans like the worn-down cheap stuff. For the 'memories' or 'aesthetic' or whatever.

"Please don't break it, the twins won't be happy."

"Did you just call me fat?"

"What? No, how did you even get that from that sentence, Clay?" George asks, with a roll of his eyes. His friend couldn't see him though, just a short silhouette against a warm glow from inside. George noticed that his friend was missing from the bed that night because he wasn't kicking anyone. At first, he wasn't really concerned and turned over into Clay's spot, just really grateful to have the bed to himself but then he grew worried. That's why he went on a hunt around the house for his friend, thinking he was kidnapped or killed in the backroads. Did you think he was kidding with the stories?

But nope. Just on the swingset. Thank God.

"Why are you up, George?" Clay says. He pushes himself off the ground, snowing stirring up in the air and the chains groaning.

George shrugs. "I missed kicking you, so sleeping isn't fun right now."

"Aw, you miss me? You want me to come back?" His friend teases. George didn't even blink at the comment, wrapping his exposed arms around his chest, and he scoffs.

"I was considering locking the door behind you, actually," he shudders as the wind blew. "But seriously, come back inside it's way too cold out here."

"I think I'll stay, it's quiet out here."

It was pretty quiet, the snow sucking any sound around them and muffling it but left the gentle howl of the wind that pinched at George's fingers and cheeks. The sky was black and the skinny branches of trees scraped the sky and obscured the view of the bright moon.

"Alright suit yourself, but I'm heading back to bed. Have fun! I'm definitely leaving you out here." George said with a heavy sigh, turning and super ready to head back into the warmth.

"You're not going to join me?" Clay asks, the chains falling silent as he digs his toes into the hard ground to stop. George looks at him over his shoulder, a suspicious look casting a shadow on his

features.

"Why, what are you planning?"

"Nothing!" Clay wheezes, crossing his heart. He brushes off the snow from the swing next to him. "Swear."

George considers the empty swing for a few seconds and holds up a finger. Clay watches his friend go into the house and come out with a winter coat and hat pressing his brown hair against his forehead.

"So what are you doing exactly?" George asks, rocking on the swing slightly. Clay looks up at the night sky.

"Just enjoying one of the few real winters I'm experiencing. What are you doing?" He asks, taking a deep breath. The air was so cold and sweet in Clay's lungs, he felt at peace with himself and it was a little weird. He acted the same and he felt the same, but he also felt like he reset himself. Did that even make sense?

"Falling asleep, to be honest." His friend grunts, leaning his face against the chain, his eyes closed.

"If you're going to be salty you can leave."

"No, it's fine. Someone has to make sure you don't accidentally get taken."

"Well if I get taken, then it wouldn't be an accident right?"

"Shut up, Clay. Keep inhaling the gross England air, you weirdo." George retorts, bringing his eyes up to the moon. Clay's heart slowed as he watched the white reflection of the moon shimmer in his friend's eyes. He had a look going for him right here. With the cold flushing his skin and the moon darkening his eyes, he reminded Clay of a zombie and he meant that in the best way possible.

The two sat in comfortable silence for a while, George leaning way back and pretending not to notice the familiar prick of his skin when Clay looked at him. Since the car, neither of them really tried to advance anything and left things where they were, but George wanted more. He's been wanting more from his friend, but Clay was still hard to read when it came to his emotions.

"Clay?" George found himself saying. "What's your favorite memory as a child?"

"Oh man, probably the first time my brother caught a snake when we were in the yard."

George looks at him. He's never seen a snake in person and it was insane how casually Clay just mentioned it like it was a common thing.

"I'm sorry, the first time?"

"Yeah, once he figured out how to catch them he would chase my sister around in the yard," Clay explains, a small laugh escaping his lips. George couldn't help but laugh with him.

"So what was so special about the first time?"

"My brother freaked the hell out and started crying with this poor animal being choked to death in his hands."

"Clay, what the fuck?" This wasn't a very happy story. George was thinking something more basic like going to Publix and he would get a sub with his family every Friday. Snakes and choking were

the last things he could imagine.

Clay wheezes. "No, it's not like that! My dad took it from him and threw it in the bushes, but my brother just went searching for it again once he calmed down."

"You are something else, Clay."

"Don't you mean Mr. Miami?"

"No, not that. That name is too bland in comparison to the story you just told me. Are Florida people really that crazy?" George asks, his friend laughing hard. He could not imagine picking up a snake or even sharing a yard with them.

"Well, we got to deal with the wildlife somehow!" Clay defends himself and shields himself from George's bewildered face with another wheeze. "Don't look at me like that, it's not like it was me."

"Whatever you say, Clay," George said and he turned away but he was chuckling to himself, more at Clay's defensiveness than anything else. That poor snake.

The two fall back into quietness, George flicking up the snow with the toe of his sneaker and watching it dissolve in the air in front of him. George had no idea what time it was and he could feel the drowsiness creeping up on him, stifling yawns and forcing his eyes open.

"You can go inside if you want, you look awful," Clay says, watching his friend struggle to remain conscious.

"No, no. It's fine, I want to stay out here with you." He said but his eyes fall shut, freezing chain biting into his cheek. "Someone's got to make sure you don't get murder-."

"George, did you want me to kiss you?" Clay asks suddenly and with a lot of force like he was making himself ask the question. This woke George right up and he whipped his head to Clay.

"Wha-? Which time?" George said. It was weird to have to ask his friend to clarify which time they almost kissed because... they were supposed to be friends?

"Both times, I guess."

"The pond, no. I really wished we never ever did that." George admitted. To be fair, that's what drew up George's feelings for Clay and if that never happened then they wouldn't be here all confused.

"Then what about the car?" Clay said so quietly that George had to strain to hear him, which was crazy because it was dead silent around them.

George didn't want to answer that, so he stayed quiet, looking down at the ground and pressing his chapped lips together. If he said yes, the truth, he could risk their friendship if Clay was just doing it because of the high tension in the car, he would embarrass himself and strain the friendship. If he said no, however, then he could risk hurting Clay and strain the friendship. It was a lose-lose to George, either path it still hurt them.

He could see Clay patiently waiting in the corner of his eye. "I'm not saying anything, Clay. So you can stop looking at me," George said.

"Can you though? I'm tired of being confused all the time."



"Again, you say that like it's only you that's going through it."

"That's because you hide it so well," Clay points out, stretching lazily before standing up. "Look, I'm just asking, you don't need to get so secretive about it. I just want to know what you thought before I did something again and made you uncomfortable since you won't tell me."

George scrambled off the swing. "Me? Not telling you things? That's funny, Clay. Remind me who had to literally lock the car doors to make you talk."

"But that whole thing wasn't fair in the first place. Shouldn't friends be able to talk willingly and not have to be forced to?" Clay said and George ignores the sting.

"Yes, but even though we're friends, you still don't talk to me. And forgive me for giving a shit about you in the first place, but I'm trying here."

"You should be able to respect the fact that I don't want to talk about it, you know? Like a friend?" Clay said, straightening his spine as George takes a step forward.

"Yet, you run off with my cousin and spill all your little secrets. You have no issue telling her about everything but the moment it comes down to telling me, you chicken out and run back to Erin." He jabbed a finger in Clay's chest, wind whipping around them, and ruffling Clay's blonde hair.

"That's because it's about you, George!"

"Then tell me what it is so I can fix whatever I'm doing wrong!" George pleads angrily.

"No, because it's not what you're doing wrong, it's what you're doing right." Clay gives up, shoulders dropping in defeat.

"Why can't you just admit it, Clay? Why is it so hard for you?" George could tell his friend knew exactly what he was referring to.

Clay's eyes meet his and lock. "I don't have an answer for you."

George swallows. "Of course you don't."

Clay draws back slightly, hurt crossing his face and he sighs. George felt kind of bad, he didn't mean for it to blow up like that but whatever. He was too tired to really deal with it at this point- if Clay wanted to talk that badly he could've done it when it was not in the middle of the night and cold as fuck.

But standing here alone, in front of the creaky old swingset with Clay, George said another fuck it. If Clay wanted his answer so badly, he's going to get one and they were going to fix this.

George leans forward, stepping up on his tippy toes and wraps a gentle hand on the back of Clay's neck and draws him in, head tilting to the side and he kisses him.

Clay's lips were cold and wet, which was kinda off-putting, but something popped in George's heart, and a flood of emotions translated into his lips as he presses carefully at first then a bit harder. Clay took a moment to respond, eyes wide in shock as he felt George's soft lips on his, and he tips George's chin up further and kissed him back.

Their eyes fall shut, the air hot with electricity around them, and Clay presses his lips deeper into George's but with a careful gentleness like he didn't want George to shatter beneath him. George

can feel himself falling fast and George moves his hands up to Clay's hair, running his fingers through the softness with every nerve in his body on fire and his heart thudding strongly- and certainly- in his chest. Clay's hands scorched George's face, his thumbs tracing George's cheekbones lightly and he wanted to combust on the spot.

Clay was the first to pull away, mouth opened slightly in disbelief as George pulls away slowly but he looked a little relieved. George takes a few steps back.

"I'm sorry!" He apologizes, the hot blush of embarrassment and shame catching up to him. "I'm so sorry, Clay. I didn't mean to do that, that was so impulsive. I'm sorry-"

Clay swoops down again, pressing a firm and definite kiss on George's lips, and pulls away with a faint smile. Then he looked a bit confused about why he did that again and the boys stare at each other for a few moments, faces both pink with matching What-The-Absolute-Fuck-Was-That-What-Did-We-Just-Do expressions.

"Oh my god," Clay said to him. George snorts, then chuckles, then starts to laugh and he rips his hat off and runs his fingers through his hair. "What's so funny?"

"You wanted an answer, Clay," George responded, still laughing and his...friend?... looked at him like he went insane.

"George, are you okay?"

"Yes!" More than okay actually. He felt giddy and drunk, his nerves buzzing. It took Clay a minute of watching his friend laugh hysterically before he joined in, wheezing lightly and sliding a hand down his face.

"Holy shit," George whispered. Their friendship was going to be so fucked after that, but George didn't care anymore. Clay kissed him back so he got his answer, it's up to Clay now to interpret it. "I'm going to go sleep now."

Clay had opted to stay outside for a few more minutes, which George was very thankful for, he needed to collect himself and have a minute to kick himself for doing that. When George crawled back into his bed, he gently traced his lips, remembering how nicely theirs fit together and how refreshing it felt. It felt like George had his first sip of water after wandering in a hot desert for days.

George just really hoped that it was worth it and Clay would be able to get past whatever was eating him on the inside.

art by @olegkawaii on Tumblr





art by @gardenshnail on Wattpad

## Chapter Notes

Sorry if this chapter is kinda late, i had to catch up on school work before i started failing LMAO

also sorry if there are tons of mistakes, my brain do be kinda fried

\*\*\*\*\*

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Clay did not move past the block.

In fact, he took staggering steps back.

As soon as George left to go inside that night, Clay came down from the adrenaline rush and dry heaved into the bushes and spit at the ground violently. But don't get him wrong, it was everything he imagined kissing his best friend would be. But it's like his mind rejected the kiss and he suddenly felt horribly ill, the sour swirl back and punching him in the gut, threatening to throw up the feelings physically.

He knew that George didn't mean it and it was in the heat of the moment, Clay also knew that it didn't mean anything that second time they kissed. Both kisses were bogus. It was all emotions running high and neither of them were good with dealing with situations like that, so Clay silently forgave George and prayed that he felt the same way about them also.

Clay coughs and takes in a deep breath, braced against the swingset wood with splinters biting down into his hand but he couldn't focus. His chest felt tight and he wanted to vomit whatever emotions stirred deep inside him that caused the swirl to flip and stab at him. His heart was racing fast, hands shaking still from what happened but he managed to stand straight up and walk towards the house. He felt like a rotting corpse.

They couldn't do that again- it was clear Clay wasn't ready for whatever George made him feel, and even though it was a really good kiss, Clay didn't want to put himself through that again.

So now imagine how George must've felt the next day, his friend walking into his room and shutting the door behind him, and saying:

"We can't do that again."

If you imagined him being confused and a tiny bit nervous, you are absolutely correct.

"Do what?" George laughs, turning around in his desk chair to face his friend. Clay raises an eyebrow at him.

"George, seriously?" Is all he has to say before it clicked in his mind, face dropping in realization.

"Look, I get it's hard for you and all, but I thought I made it-"

"No, like we can't ever do it again. I don't want to be with you like that, you know?" Clay explains, not moving from the door. "This is going too far and they didn't mean anything, I thought if we...you know... I would get an answer or at least feel better."

"Instead you feel worse," George mutters, wincing at the harsh reality. Clay doesn't want to confirm it, he can already see the pain from the words in his friend's face, so he just continues to stand and stare dumbly.

"I'm sorry I took-"

"Okay, Clay. I get it, you said what you had to say. Can you please leave?" George sighs over him. He turned his back on Clay, hunched down over papers, and hid his face. Clay waits for a moment, seeing if George was going to add something or fight back, but when his friend doesn't turn around- Clay leaves.

He stood out in the hallway, the swirl lightening but that warm feeling in his chest for his friend turned into a fire. His chest burned with guilt and sadness that he hurt George again, but he needed to move on. It was stupid on George's part to think he broke through to him anyways.

George listened as Clay's footsteps walked away, pencil clenched tightly in his fist and a stinging tear slid down his cheek. George wiped it away quickly because he didn't cry, he never cried. Not even when his dad didn't talk to him for days after George came out. So was he really about to cry over Clay? Hell no.

Yet, another tear slid out and George angrily wiped it away with a loud groan and threw his pencil down in frustration. He was angry at himself and he felt so dumb for having the confidence in Clay to wake the fuck up, but he really just made a lovesick fool out of himself to his best friend and created a huge and awkward rift between them.

There's a soft knock at his door and George rubs his eyes hard, drying up whatever other stupid tears threatened to fall. "Come in!"

Mary pokes her head in, brown eyes wide with concern. Erin's head pokes out on top of hers with an unknowing smile and she looks at George.

"Hey, I'm thinking about heading back out to the pond with the twins this time and we could teach them some-"

"I'll pass." George snaps. He turns back to the empty paper, drawing lazy circles and stars on it to distract himself.

"Georgie, what happened?" Mary asks, sensing her brother's mood and she walks carefully into the room. "You look sad."

"I'm okay, Mary." He said, not even looking at his sister. She was carrying around the shark plushie and she frowns, poking George's cheek with its soft nose. It reminded him of Clay.

"Clay looked sad too, did he hurt your feelings?" It was such an innocent question but it made George feel so miserable.

"No, he and I are okay." Lies. Biggest of the fattest lies. Mary puts her cheek on his shoulder for a second and runs back to Erin, accepting that answer as a legit one. She was little though, she didn't know better.

But Erin did.

"Mary, I'll be down in a second. Go see if Jack wants to come." Erin says to her and she giggles, galloping out of the room and Erin shuts the door.

"Erin-"

"George, before you say you're fine, your eyes are puffy so don't try to worm your way out," Erin says. George spins around in his chair, annoyed that his project was going to take him forever to finish since people can't seem to leave him alone.

"Seriously, I'm okay. Just made a stupid, dumb, foolish, idiotic mistake."

"And I'm assuming it involved Clay?"

"Duh, who else?" George scoffs and Erin studies his face, eyes soul searching for an answer and her face melts in happiness.

"Oh my god! Did you guys kiss?"

How the fuck- "How'd you know?" George asked bewildered, but mostly amazed at his cousin.

"You have that look on your face. So what happened? Why are you all sad about that?"

"Because Clay said he didn't mean the kisses and he said he never wanted to do it again," George said. Erin's face drops.

"Wait- kiss-es? Like plural?"

"Erin! Wrong thing to worry about."

"Sorry! I'm surprised though, I thought Clay was finally over the homophobia."

George blinks and sits up straight. That's new. "The what?"

"Yeah, he told me that he thought our family was low-key homophobic and that he didn't want to do anything to ruin your friendship- but I guess he already did. In a way," Erin explains, pursing her lips.

"What?!" George yells exasperated. That was it! That was the thing that was blocking Clay, holy shit, that's what he meant by the 'homophobic in a way' comment! It all made sense to him.

"Whoa, he didn't tell you that?" Erin said. "Oh lord, I've said too much."

"No, you've said just the right amount," George said, anger rising. He understood the whole homophobia thing but the fact that Clay thought George wouldn't, and he was actually the gay person here who dealt with it, was crazy.

"Look, George, give the poor guy some slack-" Erin said, reading his anger between his words.

"No! No, I won't because he's been playing this game too long. He can't almost kiss me-twice-, then cuddle me, then ACTUALLY kiss me and then back away from it. That's not fair. He gets mad at me for reading the situation wrong and wanting to talk, but then expects me to bend at whatever he's feeling?" George yelled at Erin. He was standing up and pacing in his room, Erin's worried eyes watching him move back and forth.

"I understand that George and you can be angry, but Clay has been struggling with this since before you met. It's probably rooted in him at this point, you can't change him just by a few kisses and

handholds."

"Erin, I'm so tired-" his voice gives in, hoarse and defeated. "I'm so tired of wondering and then being confused. I was so sure I had an answer-"

"I know George," she places her hand on his arm, rubbing comfortingly. "I know. I thought he wasn't going to let it scare him, I was so confident in you guys. But you really can't be mad at him, he tried right? Maybe you just got too invested in this."

"Whatever," George says, ignoring the hot prick starting behind his eyes. He was frustrated that nobody could see how hurt he was, not only because his friend didn't like it, but because his friend didn't trust him enough to talk to him. He sat down at his desk and focused on scribbling on his paper, tongue in cheek, as his cousin quietly left his room. He was getting way too into the act, he just wanted to go back to America and pretend this never happened.

Meanwhile, Clay was downstairs having a different conversation with George's mother.

When he had walked into the kitchen, Rose took one look at his face and put her mug down, eyebrows drawn with worry.

"Dear, are you okay?"

"Yeah! Yeah, everything's good." Clay said with a smile and Rose shook her head.

"Clay, what did George do this time?" She asked and Clay froze. Was it normal for fake boyfriends to talk shit about the other to their own mom? They didn't go over this.

"He didn't do anything," He kissed me and I liked it, but then I almost threw up in your bushes because I also didn't. "But, he's been acting weird lately." Lie. It was him that was acting weird.

"Yes, I've noticed. George is an odd soul, Clay. He's terrible with words but my boy has the biggest heart I've ever seen in a person. You out of all people should know that."

Clay grabs a cup and fills it with water. "Yeah, I do." This wasn't a lie.

"I know this can be stressful, being around your boyfriend's family and all-" Clay ignores the swirl bite and takes a long sip of water. "- but George seemed so happy when he finally said he was bringing someone home for Christmas. So, I'm sure if he's acting strange, it's probably because he's not used to it."

Wait, finally brought one home? "Has he...dated...anyone before me?" Clay asked. He and George didn't usually talk about their relationships much, it just never came up.

"No, you're his first. Poor Georgie got so sick of seeing his aunt and uncle so mushy together."

"That's funny, I haven't really noticed them being that mushy."

"That's because they're filtering themselves this time," Rose says with a wink, and Clay looks away. Jeez, now he really felt like an asshole. He was George's 'first boyfriend' and probably just ruined the whole experience for him. "I'm sure whatever happened, George will bounce back."

"Are you sure?" He asked slowly. He remembered the hurt crossing George's face before he turned away, voice ice cold.

"Yes, dear. I'm positive." She said. Clay still didn't feel better. In fact, he felt so much worse now.



How do you apologize to someone for something they wouldn't understand? How does he even make it up to him? He spoiled George's first kiss.

Clay didn't know where to go after- not upstairs because George was hoarding the room with the angriest vibe Clay has ever felt from his friend, and he couldn't go to the living room because he couldn't face George's family like that. Not after who he just hurt.

So he tugs on a jacket and gloves and walks out to the swing set, rocking mindlessly until Rose called dinner at sunset. Nothing could prepare him for what was about to happen.

They managed to keep up the act for three weeks, two days, and 19 hours. They were so close, both able to choke down their emotions and fight through it, doing it for the sake of George's pride and he ended being the one who cut the rope and let them fall.

But let's back up here. What really happened that night and how it truly changed the boys, and while it seems bad, it changed them for the better.

Dinner started about as fine as it can go, the boys sitting stiffly next to each other and back-breaking guilt sitting on Clay's shoulder as he pretended not to notice the violent bounce of George's leg.

"You guys must be ready for the new year right?" Aunt Lily had asked to break the silence. They all nod politely and make small talk, playing along with Clay and acting like George wasn't a ticking time bomb at the moment. Rose starts off the game of going in a circle to name empty goals and resolutions for the new year.

"What about you, Clay? Any resolutions you want to make?" Uncle Ben said when it came around to him. Clay, unable to eat, looks up and pretends to give it heavy thought. He couldn't focus. He felt so icky like he ate mud and covered himself in slime.

"Uh- probably just to learn something new? I guess," he says finally. George scoffs a laugh next to him, earning a curious look from Rose.

"Georgie, do you have something to say?"

George was silent for a moment, sharp eyes glancing at Clay and he doesn't say anything. The guilt teetered into annoyance.

"George, if you have something to say just say it." Clay said and George fully looks at him, face hard as a rock and his jaw clenched tight.

"I just found it funny that you want to learn something new when you already struggle with understanding basic human emotions," he said. Clay's eyes twitched and his heart rate spiked as his friend adds: "Because if you can't even grasp that, why would you even try to learn something else?"

"George!" Erin gasps. She couldn't believe her older cousin had the nerve to start this at the dinner table, in front of the rest of the family.

This peaks Aunt Lily's curiosity. "George, is everything alright?"

"Yes-" Clay says at the same time George says the opposite. The boys turn to each other and George rolls his eyes.

"Fine, yes. Everything's good," George wanted the anger out of him.

"You know what it sounds like you two need?" Rose starts, rising from her chair a bit. "Dance therapy-"

"No mum! We don't need your stupid dance therapy, we need Clay to fucking own up to his feelings and stop being a coward!" George yells, finally exploding and he slams his hands down at

the table. Clay watches Erin bury her face in her hands, greatly disappointed.

"George, I'm going to have to ask you to stop yelling," Steve says, placing a comforting hand on his shocked wife.

"Stop yelling? I have a damn good reason to yell right now."

"George, calm down-" Clay finally says, coming back from the surprise.

"Don't-" he turns and jabs a finger in his friend's face. "-you start, Clay. Don't even try to play those cards right now."

"What cards, George?" He responds with the table deathly silent. Even the twins stopped messing around and were watching intently, fearful, and ignorant of the situation unfolding.

"Your excuses for 'talking later' and completely downplaying what you're doing- not only to me- but to yourself. You're telling me to calm down when you know exactly what you did was a huge deal to me. You make excuses and hide, it's pathetic." George spits and Clay shoots up this time.

"You need to stop talking. You have no idea what's been going-"

"Oh yes, I do. Erin told me and honestly, Clay- did you really think I wouldn't understand? Do you honestly think I'm an idiot?"

Clay looks over to Erin. "You told him?"

"To be fair, I thought you already told him at this point," she said with an apologetic wince.

"What is going on here?" Aunt Lily asks, her inner cop picking out the subtle story in their words.

"Aunt Lily- has Uncle Ben EVER backed out of a kiss before? Or at least take it back?" George asks with anger still flaring in his words.

"George, stop. Please," Clay begs, trying to reach out and tug on his friend's shirt to snap him back into reality. But his friend was too far gone, the powerful force of hurt and anger sweeping him into himself.

"Clay! Stop acting like you care-"

"I do care! I care about you a lot George, so please just calm down and we'll actually talk-"

"Guys, I think you both need to take a few deep breaths-" Erin cuts in, but the boys are too focused in on each other, big red targets painted over their faces for each other, and George found himself wishing this would crush their friendship. Just so he won't have to feel bad later and be reminded of this night when he saw Clay's face.

"You don't care, Clay. If you truly cared for me, you wouldn't be fucking around like this and dancing around the facts. You like me and you know it." George said. Clay's face falters and he felt the sour taste of the swirl come back into his mouth.

"George, of course I care about you-"

"Please," George scoffs. "Drop the act, Clay. You aren't my boyfriend so stop trying to cover our tracks at this point. It's over, I'm done."

A cold silence as the words settle over everyone, George's eyes showing a glint of regret as he

realized his words but he didn't back down. The truth was out and everyone was staring wide-eyed at Clay, waiting for his response.

"George-" he says softly. He felt so ashamed for the lie and he didn't want to look at Rose's face, he knew she was going to be pained that her own son lied about something so huge for him and she let some stranger into her home. She shared their traditions with him, only to have it crumble down and have it be a lie.

"Shut up, Clay. It's pathetic and sad you don't know yourself and you won't allow yourself to grow. It makes you look like a loser, honestly." George's words bit into Clay's heart, ripping it out of his chest and his blood turned to slush in his veins. He was frozen, time moving so slowly and no one saying anything to them. Clay needed someone to speak, someone to take George's hot glare off of him, but everyone kept their mouths shut. Not even Erin tried to defend Clay, becoming interested in the crack in the table and picking mindlessly at it.

Rose finally stood up, clearing her throat and muttering a soft pardon. She walks out of the room and one by one, the family follows. Uncle Ben tucking Aunt Lily under his arm, Jack guiding his shaken up sister out of the room and Erin just shakes her head at them- looking upset.

"Way to go, guys." She said with a low voice as she walked by, neither of the boys refusing to look away from each other. "You couldn't have waited a few more days?"

Finally, Steve stands up. He looks more disappointed at his son, sighing heavily and leaving to go find his family and giving the boys space.

"Fuck you," Clay whispers. George narrows his eyes.

"What?"

"Fuck. You. George." Clay says louder and slower, putting every ounce of negative energy in his words. His friend recoiled in surprise and folded his arms, officially closed off for Clay. He feels the harsh pressure of tears behind his eyes and George doesn't even blink, looking numb and dead, not saying a word to apologize to him or take back any words.

"So that's how you really view me, huh?" he asks, swallowing to keep his voice steady. "You're not going to bother listening to what I had to say?"

George softens a bit, but his tone still stayed harsh. "Clay, I am tired of being used by you and waiting for you to figure out what you want."

"I'm not usin- whatever. Glad to know my friend thinks so highly of me," Clay said. He pushed passed his friend, snagging his coat on the way out the front door and he walks into the street. He didn't know where he was headed without his tour guide, but as long as it was away from the house that held all of his unspoken truths about George, he was fine.

He really did like him and deep down, in that swirl, was an unquestionable crush for his friend. As much as the little voice screamed and begged him not to accept it, he did and it was so hard to. He walked and walked, going further and further into the town as fat snowflakes fell and reminded him of how George looked at him that morning in the snow. George has always been there for him, but Clay kind of was using him to give in to his unknown wants. And apparently, he wanted George.

Clay finds himself walking up to a library, senses becoming flooded with calm in contrast to George's loud words in his head. He passes by people doing some last-minute book checkouts or finishing up any work and finds a comfortable corner in the back, hidden out of sight and out of the

way for anyone else focusing. The library was going to close soon so he had a little bit of time to sulk before heading back to the house.

He sits down and drops his head in his folded arms, a shuddery sigh escaping his chest and he felt a tear slip and drop onto the wooden table. He was truly jealous of how George found himself so easily, like it never bothered him, but he couldn't act like George's words didn't feel like an icy knife through his heart. They were supposed to be friends- ride or dies, amigos, homies- and they were supposed to be there for each other. So what changed, and why wasn't George there for him?

Well, to be fair, Clay did take responsibility for not telling George from the start of what was going on and how he just scarred his friend from ever trusting someone again. Of course, that didn't give George the pass of saying those terrible things, and Clay absolutely knew George really didn't mean them but he felt bitter resentment in him.

Suddenly, Clay felt cold air sweep at his feet as the doors opened and muffled footsteps approached him. The person strides were long and controlled, so it clearly wasn't George which Clay was completely fine with. George had the tendency to trip on his feet a lot, though.

"Clay?" The person's voice says, voice deep and soothing. "I think we need to have a little talk."

Clay peeks his head up to George's father. He was bundled up and smelled like spice with his gaze so apologetic and fatherly, Clay wanted to cry on the spot. But he wouldn't because he was a grown adult and it would be kind of weird. So Clay took a deep breath and sat up, giving Steve a quick nod.

It was time to fix this, once and for all.

## Chapter Notes

we have one more chapter left :(

Where to even begin with this...

First George's father spoke to him, easing a gentle conversation out of Clay about life in the States and in Florida, and Clay would listen to George's father talk about his work. He was an English professor who had a bad habit of hoarding old books with the pages so worn he could barely read them.

"One day," he started a story with a fold of his hands on the table. "I found an antique edition of a Winnie the Pooh story and brought it home to George. He was six at the time and didn't care for reading, so he would hide it from his mother and me when we asked him to read it to us."

Clay chuckles softly. It sounded like his friend, always avoiding the things that he didn't want to do. He was a trickster and loved messing with people, but the moment the consequences started to roll in, he would leave and pretend that he didn't do anything.

"But one day, he got angry at me for something and he took the book and ripped the front cover off. Knowing kids, he wanted me to react and wanted me to punish him so he had a reason to actually get angry at me, so he was surprised when I just walked away. I believe the guilt got to him first though and a few hours later he came back with the cover taped and he sat and read to Rose and I. He ended up loving that book, Clay. He would read and tell us about it even though we already knew what happened."

There was definitely a hidden message in there somewhere. "Yeah?" He responds carefully. George's dad gives him a soft smile.

"Clay, I know you aren't dumb and I hope you don't think I am."

"No, sir." Sir, blah. Clay was acting like he was actually the boyfriend now.

"I knew about the act too, since the beginning. You may have fooled my wife because she has always worn rose-colored glasses, but I know my son and I've seen him have crushes." Steve says and Clay avoids eye contact. "However, in the course of the three weeks you've been here, I've seen my son fall for you. I never thought I would be able to see it, but I did."

"What do you mean?"

Steve sighs deeply and controlled. "When George first came out to us, it was hard for me to accept it. I told myself I wouldn't let it bother me but I also found myself avoiding him, my image of my son was skewed."

Clay's mouth drops slightly but he clamps it shut. He had a feeling at least one person in the family wasn't going to like it.

"But Clay, I let George teach me and I accepted him because he was still my silly, stubborn boy."

He says quickly, reading Clay's face. "Here's where I was going with that story: I'm saying that you never ever deserved to be called a coward by him. He knows first hand how hurtful it is to have people break ties just because of who you love, his own friends did it to him, and you should be able to accept yourself, Clay."

"I'm not-" Clay's voice chokes. "I can't."

"I know it seems that way, but I promise you that whoever told you otherwise is wrong. And if they won't love you, there are seven people back at the house who will. You will feel so much better." Steve says, watching Clay struggle not to break. "Clay, I don't want to push you and if you aren't ready, you aren't ready. But just please know that the world won't be pinned against you and you will have so many people that will continue to love and support you."

"What about George though?" He asks.

"George is mad, but I have no doubt that his mother is talking some sense into him." Steve chuckles.

"I really hurt him."

"And he hurt you just as equally."

Clay thinks for a little while, the two sitting in the library with the hushed wind blowing outside. He remembers all the times George and he have laughed together and at each other, the late nights of video recording and talks that went deeper as the night progressed, how George looked at him like he was the best person in the room no matter where they were. He knew it was time to let go of the painful words tied to him.

"I like George." He said.

"I know. We all know because even though the act was fake, you guys still have such a strong bond and we could see both of you fall harder and harder. George quicker, but that's just him. He gets attached quickly." Steve adds with a small laugh.

It felt relieving having it hang out in the air, to someone other than himself. He felt like a massive cloud of smoke thinned around him and the air became a bit more breathable. Steve was ultimately right in the end, for the two people that suppressed and kicked him down, there was ten other people that loved him to replace them both.

"Are you ready to head back, Clay?" Steven said. Clay bites the inside of his cheek, semi-scared for what he was going to walk into but he nods.

"Yeah, I am."

George, however, was NOT ready to have Clay back to the house.

"George- that's not the right 'your'," Erin said over his shoulder, cradling Mary on her hip. After his mom brutally tore into him for hurting Clay and ruining the dinner, he was sat down to write an apology letter to his friend.

"I know! I'm nervous." George admitted, covering the letter with his arm. "Mum, do I have to do this? I was just defending myself."

"Yes, George. You lied and made Clay leave our home. That's not being a good host," Rose said from the kitchen sink. He was barely halfway done with the letter and he found himself pouring

more out than he wanted, so Erin breathing down his neck was not helping.

"Erin! Go. Away," George said pointedly. She rolled her eyes but backed away.

"Seriously, George. It's an apology note, what can be in it that's so secretive? We already know you like him." Erin reasons.

It was because he was over apologizing. His talk with his mom really put things into Clay's perspective for George, finally realizing that Clay was struggling with something that he couldn't help but feel after years of lying to himself and other people. George couldn't imagine the pain of covering up who you were. He felt bad for calling a coward and exposing the act, but not for accusing him of using George to indulge in his hidden feelings. Anyways, the letter was just a long list of 'I'm so sorry' and he tried really hard to explain he never wanted to hurt Clay and he was just so confused and didn't know where they stood.

If you asked George what he thought was going to happen when he brought Clay to England, he would've said Minecraft marathons and joking around in the town. He would've never imagined that developing feelings and getting into this mess would be apart of that list.

He was still scribbling words down when he heard the front door open, but he kept going. He didn't need to turn around and see who it was because he could smell the vanilla and cologne behind him, taking a seat next to him.

"George-" Clay starts to say.

"Mm, shut up, I'm still writing," George says, tone harder than he meant. He meant that to be funny, but Clay didn't wheeze and George apologized for saying that in the letter too.

"George, I like you."

George stops writing.

"Yeah, I know? We all know Clay. You're the only one who didn't," George panics. Even through the guilt, panic, and still raw feelings for his friend, he could feel his frustration build again. Now he says it? Now he wants to accept it? After the act was out and George backstabbed him? It was backwards.

"What are you writing?" Clay moves the topic, jabbing his elbow against George's. He scoots his chair away and leans over it. He wrote down a few more words, drawing calculate boxes at the bottom and then folds the letter unevenly. "George, please talk to me."

George looks at Clay. "I'm not as mad anymore."

"Are you sure? You look pretty pissed," Clay wheezes gently. George wants to punch his heart for fluttering at the laugh but he keeps a straight face.

"That's because I feel used, like a science experiment."

"If it makes you feel better, I have an answer for the experiment," Clay tries.

"How much did my dad pay you to say that? Did he brainwash you with his smooth-talking skills?"

"What? No. I mean- he helped a lot. I think I'm ready to...accept things."

"Why do you sound like you're in pain when you say that?" George asks, raising an eyebrow. If the



answer started with 'I think' he was going to pass on hearing it. If he was going to let Clay in again, he needs a definite answer. He wants his first actual boyfriend to be someone he can rely on and not have to constantly deal with the questioning.

"It's still new for me, I guess." Again, with the unsure words.

"Hm, okay..." George responds. The letter felt thick in his hand and was getting slightly damp from his sweaty palms. Things fell awkward but George couldn't bring himself to apologize.

"George..." Clay says and George sees his hand come up to grab his. George freaks out for a moment, body freezing, and his brain spinning with thoughts and to MOVE AWAY!

"Ah! Haha, I have something to give you," George says, yanking his hand back and busying himself with the letter. "Yeah, I wrote this letter to you for when you came back. And now you're back. So here's the letter. Take it. Read it. I'm going outside."

He shoves the letter into Clay's chest, paper wrinkling and he struggles with his sweatshirt for a moment and watches Clay start to unfold it. Finally, the sweet release of being outside greeted him and he stumbled down the stairs. He didn't have to leave really, but he didn't want to listen to Clay's response to his letter. He had no idea if that even counted as an apology anyways, especially the last part. It was a lame joke George made to ease the emotion in the letter that had a deeper meaning, but it seemed inappropriate to put since he was apologizing for a fucked up thing.

George tilts his head up to the night sky, snowflakes falling around him and a dull heat from the streetlamp shining down on him. He opens his mouth and feels the refreshing taste of the snow electrify his senses, blindly walking around in the empty street and catching as many as he could. He felt like Pacman in a way, guided only by his knowledge of his surroundings and fueled by comfort habits. The difference is that he was eating snow and Pacman ate orange dots.

George hears the front door open and crunchy footsteps approach then stop.

"What the hell are you doing, man?" Clay wheezes, watching his friend walk around with eyes closed and mouth open.

George cracks open an eye. "Catching snowflakes, duh."

"I read your letter."

"I hope so. You're 20, you should be able to read anything." George teases.

"Please be serious for like, two seconds." Clay said and George stops Pacman-ing and looks to his friend, who was standing on the other side of the road, and he stood under the streetlamp.

"I am sorry, Clay," George said to him, making his loud voice as meaningful as possible. "I'm sorry for saying those awful things about you, I knew better. I'm sorry you struggled with that for so long too, it sucks man."

Clay laughs. "Yeah, it does suck. I'm sorry for making it seem like I was using you instead of actually being an adult and assessing my...what'd you call it? Human emotions?"

"Something like that, yeah," George said, dipping his head away in shame. He became acutely aware of how cold it was outside, skin pricking with goosebumps and he shudders.

"Can I give you a hug? You look cold," Clay says. George shakes his head, even though he lowkey did really want one. "Yes you do, you're a terrible liar."

"Shut up, idiot."

"So, now I'm a cowardly idiot?" Clay said and George throws his hands up.

"Dude- stop bringing it up! I said I was sorry!"

"Okay, okay! But I'll accept your apology if you give me a hug," Clay shrugged. George stared at him dumbfounded.

"I'm not doing that."

"Alright, then that means that your apology will go unaccepted by me and you'll have to deal with that guilt."

"I- Clay, seriously?"

"Seriously. Now, come here."

Clay opens his arms and George takes defeated steps toward him. He leans into his friend's chest, hearing a strong heartbeat in his ear, and then he feels Clay's arms wrap around him. He held George perfectly, not too gentle so it didn't seem ingenuine but also not too tight to seem threatening. It was a certain and apologetic hug and George slowly relaxed into Clay, warmth from him seeping into George and warming him up.

"You gotta hug me back George or it doesn't count."

George fakes an annoyed groan and wraps his arms around Clay, mimicking Clay's pressure, and the two boys stand there for a moment and watch the snowflakes fall around them. Neither of them wanted to let go, scared if the awkwardness would cram between them again.

"Clay, I'm sorry-"

"If you apologize one more time, I'm going to break you in half."

"Gee, thanks. Nice to know my apology is appreciated."

"It was the first hundred times in your letter, but now it's just annoying."

George pulls away slightly, glaring at his friend. "Sorry I feel bad for hurting you?"

"Stop it. No 'I'm sorry's', no 'sorry', no 'I apologize', nothing."

"You're weir-"

Clay swoops down and presses his lips on George's and he jumps with electricity bouncing through him and to his heart, making it rapidly thud in his chest. Clay kissed differently this time, more certain and he communicated more, making it clear as day that the feeling was mutual.

George melts and kisses back, thinking that actual sparks were coming off of them in the middle of the street and George pulls away.

"I wanted you to shut up," Clay said hoarsely. George was speechless, a brain full of retorts but his mouth didn't work anymore. "I really like you, George."

That was a definite answer. "I really like you too."

"Did you losers make up yet?" Erin calls from the door, the rest of the family peering their heads out into the street.

"What the hell? Were you watching us?" George yells, breaking away from Clay. Erin just grins evilly and ushers the family quickly back inside the house and George blushes from embarrassment.

"Don't let it bother you too much now, George." Clay teases and George rolls his eyes.

"Don't be a hypocrite, Clay."

"I won't be if you can kiss me again."

George grins and goes back to Clay and kisses his boyfriend one last time before they head back into the house.

## Chapter Notes

you made it to the end!! congrats :) <3 i really really really hope you guys enjoyed the fic, thank you so much for reading and supporting it. i love you guys and remember- you are loved!

\*\*\*\*\*

ARTISTS: please check my pinned post on my Tumblr, I wanna support you guys as a thank you for supporting me :)

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New Year's Eve finally rolled around, marking the end of their stay in England and it was a bittersweet feeling to the boys.

The morning started off with George feeling Clay press a gentle kiss on his cheekbone as he woke up, bright sunlight streaming through the window and making their faces glow. It was a rare instance for the England sun to come out like this, so George was already filled with good vibes for the holiday.

"Good morning, Georgie," Clay said, giving George some room to wake up and stretch.

"Oh God, never call me that again," George groans as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes. Clay chuckles lightly.

"Come on, I say I earned the right to call you that."

"Correction- my family earned the right. You sound like an idiot when you say that," George said to him, but he leans his head on Clay's shoulder.

"I was thinking more like the clown guy from IT."

"The more you talk, the more I want to just be friends again."

"You're such an idiot, George." Clay wheezes, his voice warm with fondness, and George let himself melt a little bit. The first three days following their break up and makeup were nerve-racking, to say the least. Both walking on eggshells and too scared to do anything in fear of accidentally pissing the other off, but they slowly grew comfortable with the nice reality. Clay squeezing George's hand under the table, forehead kisses in the hallway when they were alone, George leaning into Clay as they slept, and they would plant soft kisses on each other's lips here and there.

As the day progressed into the night and the town became alive with noises and music, the boys set out on an adventure for, according to George, the world's best hot chocolate before midnight hit.

"George, I highly doubt England has the world's best hot chocolate."

"That's because you haven't had it here."

Clay raises an eyebrow. "I don't need to. You guys think mince pies are good."

"Whatever. At least I don't eat biscuits and- Woah."

George stops dead in his tracks, looking up at the string of lights weaving throughout the town in a yellow glow. People were everywhere, the town plaza crowded and loud, and there were stands of food and drinks set up.

"I don't remember it being this crowded before," George said as they pushed through people. George had the death grip on Clay's hand, not letting the risk of him getting swept away happen, and he leads them stand to stand.

"You were here last year, how much could've changed?"

"I didn't come to the town last year, I had no reason to."

"Aw! And now you do because you want to show me stuff, that's cute," Clay teases and George shoots a sharp glare to shut him up. They stop and look around, George having to stand on his toes to see over the sea of people.

"I can't see anything," he groans.

"I got you, hang on," Clay said. He looks around for the stand that George started describing to him: it was simple with a sign that said 'Hot Cocoa' with two old women working it. He squirts as they move again, keeping an eye out for the stand, and then-

"There! I see it, Clay!" George shouts excitedly and pulls on Clay, causing him to stumble forward and knock into a few people. He was like a newborn giraffe.

"Jeez, thanks for yanking me, idiot."

"You would've gotten lost because you were too busy looking around."

"I was trying to help find your stand!" Clay wheezes.

"Well, you didn't help because I found it. I win."

"I didn't know it was a competition."

"That's because I didn't tell you," George answers as they approach the two old women, both being warmed by matching purple scarves and hats. "Good evening!"

The old ladies greet him back and Clay stands back, watching George pay for the cocoa in the styrofoam cups. Call him picky, but he found it hard to believe the 'world's best hot chocolate' would be sold in styrofoam cups at a New Year's Eve fair.

George pushes the cup in Clay's hand, already taking a sip of his. Clay looks down at it carefully, the liquid a rich brown (which reminded him of George's eyes) with three marshmallows clumped together. It looked normal.

"Dude, just drink it."

Clay takes the first sip, his tongue practically sizzling at the heat and he chokes a bit. How did George manage to drink half of his when it was that hot?

But then a delicious chocolate flavor explodes and it was possibly the richest taste Clay has ever experienced. The hot cocoa was thick and the vanilla from the marshmallows really sold the whole thing.

"Oh my god," Clay says and George nods slowly.

"See? Good. They make it with actual chocolate and they use milk instead of water."

"So like hot chocolate milk?"

George makes a face. "I mean, I guess. I never thought about it that way."

Clay chuckles into his cup, George finding his hand again and pulling him around the plaza. They talked mindlessly about the stands, poking fun at some of the people and cracking jokes until their cups were empty and George's alarm to head home went off.

"Is it wrong that I don't want to go home?" George asks Clay.

"It's up to you. I don't believe in New Year's anyway,"

"What? What do you mean? New Year's is a real thing, though."

"No, I know. But I mean, it's a dumb holiday in my opinion. Like, why do we need a whole holiday to show that the year is changing? We all know it is. Maybe for like the turn of a new decade, yeah. But every year is dumb."

George blinks at him. "You're stupid, Clay."

Clay wheezes in surprise but doesn't respond. He has been told that by a few other people when he would talk about his holiday opinion.

"You want to go back to the pond?" George asks.

"Eh, I don't know. I kind of don't want to be bullied by you for not being able to skate."

"When have I ever bullied you? Wait, don't answer that actually," George says once Clay raises his eyebrows at him.

"A few times actually. Should I put it in alphabetical order?"

"I said don't answer that!" George yells and Clay laughs again, the two starting to make their way to the pond in the dark. The snow crunched beneath their feet as the pond came to view. The ice looked black and shiny, George naturally stepping out on the ice with his sneakers and he slides a bit.

"How are you doing that in your sneakers?" Clay asks, watching his boyfriend push around the empty pond. It was kind of eerie though, the only light source for them was the two street lamps back up on the sidewalk and the light didn't reach them well.

"I'm just that talented," George says and he slides back to Clay. "Come on! Don't just stand there."

Clay is pulled from the grass, bracing himself to fall but he was surprisingly sturdy, and he straightened back up. George takes Clay's hands, a quick wobble in surprise from the pull, and they walk out to the middle of the pond.

"What do you think happens to the fish in the winter?" George asks, looking down through the ice,

and Clay shrugs. How was he supposed to know? He didn't live here all his life. Also, he knew close to nothing about frozen ponds.

They stayed silent, letting the world move around them as they listened to the muffled music from the town and the creak of the ice under their feet. Clay was mildly concerned for that but George didn't look worried, so he trusted him it would be fine to stand on.

"We have two minutes until midnight," Clay says, pulling out his phone.

"Interesting," George hums, his hand tangling back in with Clay's. He really was a big hand holder. "You know, I've never had a New Year's kiss before."

"Well you've never had a boyfriend before, it checks out."

George scoffs and Clay pulls him in for a hug, arms tight around George, and chin resting on top of his hair. The guilt for him never fully went away even though George said he was okay, the ashamed pang in his gut never dulled. He really hoped George wasn't lying about being okay. He saw first hand what happened when George was pushed to the edge and he never ever wanted to see it again.

"Do you think it'll be okay if I stole the first one then?" Clay says above him. George pulls away to face him with a rare soft smile.

"If I wasn't I wouldn't have mentioned it, idiot."

"Oh wow, so now you're calling me an idiot?"

"That's because you're being one."

"Keep calling me an idiot and I'll make you wait until next year," Clay says and suddenly a faint chant of counting is heard from the town. George's shoulders sag in distress as Clay stood his ground.

"Okay, I'm sorry! Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"Mm, I don't know. Sounds like you didn't mean it," Clay jokes, watching George panic as the number falls to five.

"I'm so sorry Clay, you're not an idiot. Even if you are one sometimes." George rushes to say.

3...

"Hmm..." Clay said. He pretended to think about it.

2...

"Oh my God, just fuckin-"

George reaches up and kisses him as the number hits one and the town exploded in cheers and a bell rang somewhere in the distance, marking a new year and new beginnings. They stood there together, out in the middle of the pond that started it all, and they let the swirl of emotions loose, and the negative ties were cut from them. They had finally figured it out.

When they got home, it was close to one in the morning, Rose giving them a brief scold for being out and not coming home when they said they would but she let them off the hook. She knew better than to get angry at them for going back into town and messing around. She watched as her

son and his boyfriend disappeared up the stairs and she smiled to herself, happy her boy was finally given someone who loved him for who he was.

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Waking up was super painful for Clay. His body didn't want to leave the warmth and plush of George's bed and hearing George get ready for their plane was hurting his heart. He was going to miss the cozy England town with George- back in the States awaited work and bills to pay.

"Clay, get up seriously," George said to him. It was the fourth time he had to tear the blanket off of his half-asleep boyfriend who kept pulling them back over. They have gotten a total of five hours of sleep and the plane left in half an hour, Erin woke them up late by accident.

"Idontwanna," Clay mumbles and George hits him with a pillow.

"Come on, you can sleep on the plane but we really need to go," George said. It was cute the first three times but it was getting annoying. "If you don't get up, I'll leave you here."

"That's okay."

"With the twins."

"And I'm up!" Clay said as he sits up, blonde hair ruffled and green eyes blinking to focus.

"Just hurry up and get changed, I'll be downstairs."

George takes his suitcase and wrestles with it down the flight of stairs, hitting the walls and his shins. His family was sitting around the counter with sad smiles- upset to see the boys go. Mary and Jack run to him, burying their faces in his shoulders as he kneels down to hug them.

"Stay out of trouble, okay?" He said and Mary grins, poking her shark's nose against his.

"I would hug you goodbye, but you kind of smell," Erin says, making George sniff his- Clay's- green sweatshirt. He smelled perfectly fine; like vanilla and cologne.

"I would hug you too but I don't want to get your hair grease on me," he jokes and Erin slaps him on the shoulder.

"Clay!" Jack yells and the twins run to his legs, wrapping around them like they were firemen. Clay chuckles and ruffles their hair. George bites back a huge smile.

"You boys stay out of trouble, alright?" Uncle Ben says. He had an arm wrapped around Aunt Lily and he pointed a thick finger at them. "No more fighting or you'll turn this family into world-star dancers."

"Dance therapy has been proven effective," Rose defends herself to her brother.

"I have a good feeling about you guys, so I wouldn't worry too much," George's father says, mostly to Clay, and George didn't miss the subtle exchange between the two. He made a mental note to give his father the best Father's Day present ever this year for whatever he said to make Clay feel better.

"You guys made my four weeks way more eventful than they needed to be, but I had a lot of fun," Erin said, then she adds: "Seriously, it was something out of a book."

George laughs and pulls her into a hug. He was going to miss his favorite cousin.

"Ah, get in here Clay!" Rose yells and Clay finds himself getting the best motherly hug he has ever received. Ever. With the pats and everything. He could cry right now. "Make sure our Georgie doesn't do anything stupid, alright?"

"Depends on what the stupid thing is," he admits and everyone laughs. They all exchanged hugs and goodbyes, Clay feeling accepted and loved by George's family; like he was let in on a little club. He never expected to be where he was right now, but he couldn't have been happier.

As they get in the taxi to the airport and board their plane, they left all the baggage that held them back from each other. George held Clay's hand as the two flew into a new era with each other and Clay kissed George as the small England town faded behind them.

End Notes

Hey guys! Thank you for reading this! I hope you guys liked it and if anything seems off about their personalities, let me know so I can write them better!

Also please forgive any writing errors, once I complete this fic I'll go back through and edit it!

Follow me for more dream team stuff!

@passmethemo11y on Twitter

Disclaimer, I'm aware George's family is going to be all wrong but just roll with it**

Works inspired by this one

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